The Bog And Other Horror Stories

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The Bog

The hotel room was dark, but the men inside liked it that way. And besides, they were hiding. They all talked in low voices, all four of them. Two beds sat off to the back wall of the tiny room, but they were untouched. When you were on the run, you had no such luxuries. Instead, they had pulled a round table in the center of the room, and pulled three chairs around it. The fourth watched the back door of the hotel behind them, shotgun held in hand. Time was running out, and all the men knew it. They knew that they were going to get caught, maybe even killed. Yet, they looked toward John Crow for support.

John Crow sat in one of the chairs, his demeanor was not one of ease, but that was just an appearance. Crow was a long and lanky man, with a solid, muscular frame and a thin, plain face. His eyes were his most striking feature, and that's where the true nature of Mr. John Crow could be seen. He was an evil man, regardless of his looks and his demeanor. He was not physically frightening; it was his mind that frightened people. To his left, his best friend, a short, muscular man with cowboy boots propped on the table tilted back in his chair and watched Crow. His eyes darted nervously around the table, first from Crow, and then to another member of their gang, a rather portly man by the name of Gordon. "What do we do now Crow?", The man with the cowboy boots asked, his voice deep and carrying, like a real

cowboy of western lore. Crow looked at the man, slowly raising his head, his eyes full and mournful. “I want you to listen to me Slim, and I want you to listen well. Do you understand?” Crow’s voice was even and calm, a voice that always seemed to settle people down. Slim nodded, and tilted back down again, bringing the chair back down to four legs. “Very good. They’re coming. You know it, I know it, and your brother Tommy knows it.” Crow motioned backward toward the man by the back door, which turned toward them nervously, revealing he was not actually a man, but he was closer to a boy. “You and Gordon are gonna get the hell out of here right now. Tommy and I will leave out the back, but only when the cops are close. You and Gordon will go out the front of this room, and hide. The cops will get me and Tommy, but that’s good. Because I have a plan. At eight o’ clock tonight, you and Gordon will go to where we hid the loot. Do you understand?” Slim nodded again, and his eyes shone, and within, fiery craziness shone. “Yes sir.” Crow nodded as if he expected that answer. “Good. Eight o’clock, you and Gordon go there. I’ll be there.”

Slim opened his mouth to protest, but Crow silenced him with one slender finger. “No time for an explanation. You two leave now.” Crow rose, and Slim did the same. Gordon looked at the two men for a few moments, before he slowly stood up also, his belly weighing him down. Crow motioned toward Tommy, who moved across the room with the shotgun. “Did you hear that Tommy?” Tommy nodded. “Ye-ye-yes sir.” Crow smiled. Tommy smiled back nervously, suddenly afraid of their silent leader. Youth showed on Tommy’s face, and Crow seen it. “Good Tommy. I wanted you to. Be a

good boy and give your older brother the gun." Tommy did, not looking at Slim's face, because Slim was giving him a look that could melt an iceberg. Crow dismissed Tommy with his eyes. "Get the hell out of here Slim. You to Gordon." Slim moved away, and Gordon followed, walking to the other wall opposite the beds to the front of the hotel room. Slim opened the door, and sunlight invaded the dark room. With a final look, Slim tucked away his shotgun in his coat and slide out the door. Ben followed, but with more of a waddle. Crow watched silently, and looked away as the door closed. After the door shut, he looked toward Tommy, who was still standing next to him, fidgeting nervously. "Won't be long now Tommy. Take a seat." Tommy went to move, and Crow stopped him in his tracks with more speech. "Listen Tommy. When I so go later, you'd better get your ass up and move. Do you understand me?" Tommy nodded, his squinty eyes blinking. He sat down slowly, as if Crow were going to bite him.

Crow moved across the room to, but he went to the beds, where a little table sat in between. He picked a small glass paper weight off the top. It was square, with a crown suspended in the middle in thick glass. On the front were the letters The Nobleman Hotel. He moved it around in his hand, as if its three pounds of inch thick glass meant something. Suddenly, Crow jerked his head up toward the front of the room as if he'd been stung. He looked toward the front door as if he could see through the walls. "Tommy. Get up." Crow pivoted and moved back toward the center of the room where Tommy sat. "What Mr. Crow?" Crow's normal behavior had suddenly

become hectic and nervous. *"GET THE FUCK UP!"* Crow screamed, his face transforming in anger. That's when the front door exploded inward.

Tommy leapt up as the pieces of the door smashed the ground, and men flooded in, a short, balding man with a sheriff's badge leading the assault. The cops had guns and they erupted inward. *"MOVE!"* Crow screamed, and Tommy was up and running toward the back, with Crow following closely behind. The Sheriff and his crew moved forward just as Tommy escaped through the back door. Crow turned at the doorway, moving as quickly as lightening. His arm cocked and he threw The Nobleman Hotel like a baseball pitcher. The men ducked and the sturdy paper weight exploded into shards of glass on the wall behind their heads. They straightened up, ready to fire, but Crow was gone from the room, the back door swinging shut.

The sheriff howled with rage, and he rushed forward, leaping wildly, his three deputies's following closely behind. He reached the door and ripped it open, and was running again down a long, narrow cement balcony linking rooms together. They rushed down it single file, running past room after room, each door lacking some paint from the wear and tear of the hot Louisiana sun. They reached the stairway, where the chubby sheriff practically leaped down in rage, his young deputies struggling to keep up. They ran forward, rushing through the deserted hotel parking lot. The sheriff spun in a circle, his pudgy face and his angry ears searching the parking lot. Crow was gone. The sheriff howled with rage. *"SON OF A BITCH!"* He screamed and whirled toward his deputies. "Go and get the

other one! The younger one! I saw him running that way when we came out!" The deputy's nodded, and ran off in the other direction, where a row of dumpster sat on the other side of the parking lot. Behind them were a cluster of trees and the start of the outskirts of town along down the road. The sheriff pointed at the remaining cop, a tall, muscular man by the name of Johnson. "Johnson! Me and you after Crow!' Johnson nodded, and ran with his chubby sheriff, but both men knew that catching Crow was never an option.

Three hours later, Sheriff Marcus Stein washed his face in the sink in the bathroom of his very own police station. They had been close. So close. Crow was smart, nearly a genius. He looked at his face in the cracked mirror, and frowned at his pudgy cheeks, His hair was short, and curly, matted to his skull with sweat. It had topped one hundred degrees early that day, while the Sheriff and Johnson combed the rundown downtown of the shit stain town of Bearly, Louisiana. He was a failure. They had lost an extremely dangerous man in a town that didn't even have enough people to have a library. Marcus reached back down, reaching into the flowing, cold water and throwing it on his sweaty face. Though today was a failure in almost every way, they had one little speak of dignity left. They had the kid.

Marcus exited the bathroom, headed back into the lobby of station, where the secretary, a nice little old lady named Mrs. Henry worked the phones of emergency calls. Now, she sat in her chair behind her desk, reading a book. Her eyes regarded Marcus like the eyes of a beetle. Marcus smiled and nodded, and Mrs. Henry looked back at her book without an

answer. Marcus went past the desk into a hallway, with doorways on sides, his office, the evidence room, the equipment room, and finally, the room that Marcus needed the interrogation room. Marcus stopped, turned the handle and pushing the door opened. The door opened into a square, soundproof room, with a large, one sided window peering through into the other room, where Tommy sat a small, plain table across from Officer Johnson. The other two officers stood by the window, staring into the room, each one smiling. “Take a step back fellas.” The two officers looked at Marcus quickly before taking a tiny step back.

Marcus stood next to them, his view on Johnson’s wide shoulder, and the kid named Tommy crunched up across from him. From the speaker on either side, Johnson’s and Tommy’s voice sounded through, just slightly muffled. *“Okay Tommy. You and Mr. Crow and the rest of the rat pack buried the money where?”* Tommy was silent for a second, and then Johnson repeated his question. After a moment, Tommy answered him softly. *“The Merton Bogs.”* Marcus frowned, and the officers behind him murmured. Johnson didn’t answer for a second. *“Are you sure Tom?”* The kid nodded and hung his head. *“The bogs are some bad places Tom. There pretty big to. Where in the bogs is he talking about?”* Tommy thought silently. *“Ten miles up the river from the fish hatchery. Then it’s only a short walk into the swamps from there.”* Marcus scowled and reached into his hat to itch his head. The Merton Bogs was one of the most inhospitable places on the planet. Over 250 miles of stinking, thick, muddy mass of trees and roots that were almost impossible to travel through. The Merton Bogs lay on both

sides of the Merton River, which traveled out of state. Over the years he'd been sheriff, he chased men into the bogs many times. They sometimes stole boats and fled up river until his fellow officers caught up. Then they ran for the shore, only making it three or four feet before getting caught and stuck in the muck, that was similar to quick sand.

Sometimes, men went missing on the Merton River, and Marcus and his crew were sent to scour the river. In the fifteen years he'd been sheriff, over one hundred and fifty fishermen have went missing in the river. They were almost never found. The whole town had a distrust of the swamps. They were unnatural, horrid places where not even the most disgusting life could survive. Naturally, horror stories circulated. Stories about creatures that lurked in the murk of the seemingly endless swamp. And judging by the looks of his two deputies', the stories were believed.

The door to the room opened and Johnson came in through it shaking his head. "Goddamn it." Marcus read the look on his face like the cover of a book. Marcus smiled as his favorite deputy migrated over to him. They stood side by side looking through the window into the integration room. "What do you suggest we do sheriff?" Marcus thought for a moment, lines spreading across his forehead. "Judging by what we know about John Crow, he's crazy enough to go out there and get it." Johnson nodded in agreement. "I got his file. Joey, hand me that folder." One of the other deputies's moved forward and handed Johnson a manila folder. Johnson opened it, revealing a pile of papers and a bad mug shot of John Crow. "Served fifteen years in Florida State Prison, for killing his entire family at a dinner. They found the murder

weapon, still wet, stabbed into the turkey." Marcus shook his head. "He then moved up here, where he murdered his girlfriend with a pair of scissors When asked why, he told police that there was nothing else to do that night." Behind him, one of the deputies's grunted. "He's suspected of eight consecutive murders where he broke into houses and murdered everyone in the house. Most recently, he and a group of criminals robbed several stores across the state." Johnson nodded. "And that's the fortune they supposedly buried in the Merton Bog." He closed the folder and crossed his arms, staring at Tommy, as he cowered in the room.

"Do you think that the kid's telling us the truth?" Marcus asked. His deputy thought silently. "I think so. The kid's so green I don't think he knows any better to lie to us. He's got no criminal record. He looks like he should be in school in History class or something." Marcus nodded. "Good. Then we're going up the river. Get a boat. I don't care where. And," Marcus paused and pressed on, "Find a deputy with a little knowledge of the river." Johnson nodded, though his face looked confused. "Wait sir. Why can't we just call the state boys to come out and help us?" Marcus turned, running his pudgy hands over his fat face. He turned to Johnson slowly, his face growing red. He scowled at the other two deputies', who took the cue and left.

Once they were gone, Marcus looked at Johnson levelly. "This guy is *mine."* Marcus paused to let that sink in. "He's killed nine people in my county, right under my nose. Then we caught up with him, and he escaped us like we were a bunch of morons. We are going to go out there and bring

him in. I didn't report the raid on the Nobleman this morning, and I'm sure not going to report this chase into the fucking swamp. We're going to bring them in and act like we did our jobs right in the first place. Me and you Johnson. We're going to catch this sick son of a bitch even if it kills us." Johnson thought silently, still locking eyes with the sheriff. Then in a soft voice he said, "That's highly against protocol Marcus." The obese sheriff's face flushed bright red. *"Fuck protocol!"* After the out burst, Marcus seemed to calm down a little. "We've tried protocol. Protocol doesn't work. So we're gonna make our own rules and this time, he'll be ours." Marcus laid a pudgy hand on Johnson's shoulder. "Are you with me Johnson?" After a moment, Johnson nodded. Marcus smiled. "Good. I knew you would see the light." With that, the pudgy sheriff turned and left the room. Johnson stood for a moment all by himself. With one final look at Tommy, Johnson followed him out.

Gordon was going to kill him. He had decided long ago, far before Crow's so called 'plan.' Crow though he was smart. Gordon knew that Crow found people he deemed stupid, just to make himself look smarter. Gordon looked over at Slim who was eyeing the shores of the river as if something was going to come after them. They paddled down the river, the night closing in, and the bog on both sides closing in. The plan was stupid, and Crow was going to get them killed or arrested. Crow knew that Slim's pussy of a brother was going to snitch, and the cops were going to meet them there, guns and handcuffs in hand. But not him. As they paddled down the river, with its twist and turned and shadowy, dead trees throwing crooked

shadows on the water, he developed a plan. He would get the treasure, and kill Slim and possibly Crow. He looked down at his watch. An hour and a half till eight. They were almost there. They were supposed to sink the boat. Another one of Crow's half brained ideas. That's fine though. Once everyone was dead, he would take Crow's boat and escape with the money from this God forsaken place. Gordon could already smell the bog. The smell was like death. It hung heavily in the air, almost suffocating you with its thick, putrid stench.

To make matters worse, they had to journey in the trees and muck in the night and grab the money. At least they had a good spot. That was Gordon's doing. The spot was a clearing of sorts, with a spot of soft ground that was missing both the black water and dough like mud. That had been a good idea on his part. They had just put it on the side of the clearing, leaning on a massive gnarly tree that managed to grow somehow. It was only about ten feet from the shore, so they could run in and get the fuck out. "Hey fatass!" Slim's sharp words cut in though Gordon's thoughts. He looked at Slim, the hate rising. "Row you fucking fat piece of shit!" Gordon begun rowing, hating the man sitting across from him more than he hated the swamp on both sides of them. He eyed the sawed off shotgun on Slim's lap. Once they landed, he was going to blow off the top of Slim's head and feed it to the fish in the river.

Johnson couldn't find a current deputy to lead them out of the river, but he did manage to find an ex-river guide/deputy named Adam Lane to lead them out. They met him at the fish hatchery where he sat on top of his

hydrofoil. Marcus greeted Adam as they walked over, holding out a pudgy hand to be shaken. Adam was only 29 years old, a full time river guide after taking a bullet as a policeman. He wore headphones, so he didn't hear them arrive. He finally spotted them, ripping them from his ears and shaking Marcus's hand vigorously. "An honor to work with you sheriff, an honor." Adam smiled. Marcus nodded. "The honor is all mine." He motioned towards the boat. "How well does she work?" Adam glanced over and then back at Marcus. "Like a charm sheriff. Are you ready to go?" Marcus nodded. "Yes I am." Marcus looked toward Johnson. "Let's go get those bastards."

The hydrofoil tore down the river, throwing up water and howling. Since they left past the fish hatchery, the swamp had close in, dense trees and darkness within met them. The water got blacker and blacker as they progressed down the river, as if the mud from the bog was seeping into the water and poisoning it. Dark befallen, though light from the setting sun still let them see fairly well. Marcus and Adam talked, and Adam immediately knew of the clearing that Tommy had spoken of. "Yes sir. Clearings on the bog are quite rare." He chuckled. "Some people say that this bog is haunted." Johnson frowned, and Marcus's face lit up in surprise. "Really Adam? Why's that?"

Adam laughed. "Indians used to live in this area, though legend says they never ventured into the bog. They said that the bog held people's souls, like a hell on Earth." Johnson almost laughed out loud. That was the most ridicules thing he had ever heard. They turned the corner, the engine ebbing down as they moved closer and closer to the clearing in the trees. They went

silent for a second as they glided to the shore. Adam spoke up again, his voice quiet. “That’s why I sit here sheriff. I know all the clearings here, but I stay away.” Adam smiled and slipped his headphones into his ears. “I’ll be like the Indians.” He turned away from Johnson and Marcus and leaned back in his seat.

Slim lifted his head in alarm. “What the hell is that?” Gordon looked back toward the direction they had come. “That’s a boat.” Slim’s face lit up. “The cops! By god, Crow was right!” Slim looked across the river and squinted into the small clearing that the line of trees let open. “I hope Crow’s all right. He told me before that we need to sink this boat.” Slim pointed down toward the rickety old wooden row boat they sat in. “We cross and sink in. Then we run and met Crow. He’s been here.” Slim nodded, and his eyes flashed dangerously. “We gonna kill those fucking pigs Gordon. It’s gonna be *goooood.”* Slim smiled. “Let’s get a move on. We got only a few minutes.”

The river bent, and Johnson perked up. “I think this is the place sheriff.” Adam said. Marcus nodded, squinting into the sunset. “Looks like it. That Tommy kid is one hell of a describer.” Johnson stood up, and Adam began to slow it down. They could see the opening now, a small break in the trees that lined the outside of the bog. Johnson noticed with dismay that a fog had begun to roll in. *That’s gonna be great for bringing in Crow.* Adam glided the hydrofoil into the shore, like a plane onto a runway. He pulled in so the high front pointed toward the bag, the fan out toward the back. Marcus stood slowly, drawing his pistol from his holster. He turned to

Johnson. “We lost our element of surprise. We gotta move in quick and don’t hesitate. If you see him, hit him.” Johnson frowned, but the sheriff didn’t notice. Johnson respected Marcus, but the man sometimes became obsessed. And his obsessions were sometimes dangerous.

Johnson grabbed Marcus’s shoulder. “Slow down Sheriff. Crow’s a dangerous man. We can’t just parade in there like we own the place. We don’t know how many men he has.” Marcus looked at Johnson, his face blank. And then he smiled. “I know all these things. Don’t worry about it.” Like a blind man, Marcus stepped off the boat and into the muddy foot wide beach. Marcus sunk into the thick mud, the evil smell seeping up. “Jesus Christ!” He whispered in dismay. Johnson turned to Adam, who sat back with his eyes closed, music blasting through his headphones. He was going to be of no help. He was running into a battle where his only help was a gung-ho sheriff who would stop at nothing to get what he wanted.

Marcus was waiting for him off the beach a little ways on the ‘land’. The land was little more than a grey patch of dirt that was wet and stinky, only barely solid enough to stand on. Johnson drew his gun, listening for Crow. They moved off the beach onto the land. They moved toward the path and entered in between the two trees, the smell of the bog hitting them like a ton of bricks. The smell was powerful and revolting, and Johnson gagged, the smell assaulting his nose. The path they walked was two feet wide, and on either side of them was the black water of the swamp. Strange fungi floated on top, and it bubbled spitefully. Trees stuck up out of the swamp water, short, thin, sick looking trees that looked as if they had cancer.

Johnson looked left and right, and looked on the miles of swamp that seemed to go on and on in either direction, no change in the view at all. In front of them, the path turned. It lead straight on, a cluster of trees on the corner going right that blocked off view of what lay behind.

Johnson followed Marcus slowly, his gun outstretched. No animals sounded, and Johnson wasn't surprised. Nothing could live out here. Marcus rounded the path as it came, rushing forward to get around the trees. *He's going to get killed,* Johnson thought. But nothing could be done. So, Johnson rushed after the fat sheriff, watching and waiting for Marcus to get cut down by a bullet. They made it around and Marcus stopped and stiffened, raising his gun. Johnson looked to, and the sight also made him raise his gun to. Crow stood before them about five feet away. They stood at the end of the path, a rounded dead end. It was a peninsula that was surrounded by an ocean of thick mud and black water that bubbled and hissed. Crow had his back to them, and he was looked out on the bog before them. Marcus scowled. "We got you ya son of a bitch! Put your hands behind your head and slowly turn around!" Crow didn't move. "Turn around!" Marcus screamed. He cocked back the hammer on his .38 Special. "I'll kill you Crow! I don't know what's stopping me now, but it won't take much to make that go away."

Finally, Crow did turn. He spun toward them, slowly putting his arms up on both sides. Crow was grinning, his big eyes shining. "Hello gentlemen." Marcus motioned downward with the gun. "Get on the ground you piece of shit." Crow's smile widened at the command, like a child with

power over a parent. Then almost as an afterthought, Marcus said, “Nobody gets away from Sheriff Marcus Stein.”

Slim moved slowly, a catlike sneakiness in his movement. The guide stood on the boat five feet away, looking toward the path where the two cops had went. He brought up the shotgun, a double barrel shotgun. He had sawn off the barrel a while ago, preferring the wider spread. Gordon was behind him, his feet sinking into the mud. As Slim moved closer to the hydrofoil, he noticed music blasting from the headphones. He smiled. Slim stopped sneaking, racing toward the foil. He stepped on, cocking the gun as he reached the boat. He jumped onto the platform, the boat rocking with the weight displacing. Adam spun, his face widening in surprise. Slim raised the gun, bringing it up to the man’s face. Slim grinned, his eyes shining, insanity dancing feverishly within. Adam went to move, but it was too late. Slim pulled the trigger. The gun sounded and the buck shot ripped off the top of Adam’s skull, an explosion of skull, brain matter, and blood flying up. The force of the shot snapped Adam’s head back, his legs crumpling. His corpse tumbled off the side of the boat, splashing into the river below. Slim stepped to the edge, looking down on Adam’s dead body. He grinned. “Fire the boat up Gordon. This won’t take long.”

Marcus and Johnson looked at exactly the same time, drawn to the sound of a shotgun blast. “Jesus!” As soon as both officers looked around, Crow made his move. Crow was a small man, but he had compact muscles and a speed and experience that most men dreamed about. He withdrew a knife, a long, narrow blade that was sharpened while he waited for the cops

to appear. Both Marcus and Johnson had moved into a shooter's stance, in which you stand sideways, legs spread, balance equally spread so that the gun's recoil wouldn't make them lose balance. But when they spun, the balance was shifted to their back leg; their front leg stretched out and unprotected. As Crow moved, Johnson had already begun to run, but Marcus hadn't moved. Crow leapt forward, bringing the knife down in a wide arch into the obese sheriff's fatty leg. The knife plunged deep, and Marcus whipped his head toward Crow, his eyes wide and his gun temporally forgotten. Crow brought an elbow up, smashed Marcus on his chin. In the same movement, he swept his foot around, knocking Marcus's good leg out from underneath him. Marcus went down on his back, the gun flying from his hands, his back smashed on the mud, splattering it everywhere.

Crow moved toward Johnson next, tucking in his arms in a boxing stance, waiting to strike Johnson. But, unlike Marcus, Johnson was young and strong. He had turned on the sound of Marcus being stabbed, and had already begun to raise his gun. Crow moved in low, changing levels. He kicked Johnson's hand, and the gun flew up, flying harmlessly into the sky. Crow swung at his face wildly, not worrying about anything, Crow's fist connected to Johnson's chin, and he stumbled backward, dazed. Crow moved to kick him, but Johnson caught his foot with his hands at his chest, shoving with all his might. Crow flew backward, his one foot not enough to support him. He fell down, landing on his back in the edge of the water, his head and his upper shoulders going completely under the black water, his head smashing through the top layer on the water, a thin, black fungus that

grew on the top. Crow came up sputtering, his hair drenched and his face covered in the fungus. He screamed in dismay as he came up, scrambling to his knees on the muddy land, clawing at his face to get the fungi off.

Johnson raised his gun at pointed it at Crow. “Jesus Christ! Get up! Get up NOW!” Crow looked at Johnson, his face red, and a patch of the fungi clinging to his chin. For a second, he appeared as if he was going to break down. Then he grinned. Johnson scowled in anger. “What are you smiling about!?” That’s when Johnson heard a shotgun cock behind him.

Marcus slowly lifted his head. He watched in mounting horror as Crow’s henchmen moved behind Johnson, who had things under control. Marcus’s leg throbbed with pain, and his head hurt from his fall to the ground. Marcus tried to move as Crow walked around Johnson, and the tall, gangly looking cowboy raised his shotgun. Marcus opened his mouth to scream, but nothing came out. The next few seconds moved in slow motion, as if God had decided to take a closer look at the drama before him. The tall cowboy pulled the trigger, the gun rocking and the barrel exploding as buck shot flew out. Marcus watched as the buck shot smashed Johnson in the chest, his arms flying up, his chest exploding in blood. His face lit up with pain and recognition as the force of the bullets knocked him off his feet, his feet leaving the ground. Johnson hurtled through the air before smashing on the edge of the water.

Marcus’s throat opened up now, and a scream exploded from his lips. “NO!” He tried to get up, but his body failed him. He crumpled back down to his back like a turtle that had just been tipped over. The tall cowboy looked

at him and smiled, raising the gun toward him. Crow stepped up and grabbed the cowboy's shoulder. The man looked at Crow and Crow shook his head. The cowboy looked at Marcus and frowned. He lowered the gun and turned away. The three outlaws moved away. Marcus smacked his head into the mud.

Gordon moved with Crow and Slim, the three men in a line. They walked across the round opening, looking around an enormous tree that stood out of place. Behind it was a square box, a wooden chest with handles on both sides. Slim hooted his face lighting up. "Hell yes!" He reached down toward the handle and attempted to lift it. He switched the shotgun to the other hand and tried to pick it up. He lifted it up two inches, grunting in strain. It was full of money. "Somebody help me!" Crow moved over, grabbing it with both hands. Slim turned to Gordon, who was standing awkwardly off to the side. "If your going to sit they and do nothing fat ass, at least take the gun." Slim tossed it and Gordon caught it. "I'll go get the boat ready." Gordon waddled off. Slim shook his head. "Come on Slim. Let's get moving." Slim and Crow lifted, grunting as they waddled back up the path.

The sun had finally sunk, and night had begun to take hold. Gordon ran for the hydrofoil and leapt on. He looked down on the Frenchman, whose brains decorated the back of the boat and the edge of the beach. Slim and Crow came up the path, walking like crabs as they carried it. Gordon turned toward them, standing two feet above them. The boat's engine rumbled loudly, and Gordon opened up the gun. He loaded it as Crow and Slim made their way toward him.

Slim looked at Gordon, who was standing in the way of the entrance onto the boat. Slim set down the chest, his face a bright tomato red. Crow did to, frowning at Slim. Crow looked at Gordon, and his eyes sparkled. *He knows what I'm going to do,* Gordon thought. Slim turned toward Gordon, his shoulders square. "Move it Gordon! Can you get any more stu-"Gordon raised the gun and fired. The shot tore open Slim's throat and chest, his eyes rolling into the top of his head, his chest exploding. Slim stumbled backward, blood pouring from the hole in his throat, drenching the front of his shirt. He looked at Gordon, his eyes full of wonder. His knees bent and he crumpled to the ground, face down in the mud.

Crow looked at Gordon, his face blank. "Why?" Gordon scowled, the gun brandished upon Crow. "Shut up Crow! I'm taking the money and leaving you here. You and Slim have always treated me like shit and I'm sick of it. It ends now." Gordon leapt down, keeping his gun and his eyes trained on Crow. With his other hand, he grabbed the chest and began to drag it. With major difficulty, he pulled the chest up onto the boat. Crow watched in silence. After Gordon brought it up, He looked at Crow and smiled, his chubby face lighting up. "I won't be seeing you Crow." Crow grinned, his big eyes dancing. "I'll be seeing you in Hell." Gordon chuckled. He sat down in the driver's seat and looked at Crow, revving the engine. "Hopefully not too soon." Still laughing, Gordon took off, the boat throwing up waves. Crow watched him go further and further away. He was trapped.

Marcus peeled himself off the ground, keeping his weight off his leg. Once he was standing up, he looking at his leg. His blue pants were soaked

with blood, the handle of the blade sticking out. The knife had been stuck in all the way until the start of the handle. “Jesus.” He reached down to the blade, pushing the sound of the shotgun blast he’d just heard far away from his train of thought. What these degenerates did on their time was not any of his business. His business was to pull this out of his leg and stop them from leaving here. He closed his eyes and clenched his teeth, his hand wrapping around the plastic handle of the knife. *Here goes nothing. On three. One.* Marcus braced himself. *Two.* He leaned back on his good leg, tightening his grip. *Three.* He pulled the knife out, and the leg exploded in a wave of fresh pain, almost as bad as when Crow had stuck it in. Marcus threw back his head and screamed, the bloody knife clenched in his chubby hand.

Marcus stood for a moment, catching his breath. He looked over toward the path, expecting the crazy cowboy to come down it, brandishing his shotgun. Marcus begun limping slowly, counting in his mind, matching each number with a wobbly step. He made his way slowly, focusing on just the walking part. He had ditched the knife and had picked up his revolver instead, still cocked and ready to go. He would not hesitate this time. That’s when he heard the boat take off. His heart gave a leap, and suddenly he realized that he would be stuck here if he didn’t get his boat. He had no radio, and his cell phone would never get any service this far away from civilization. He limped faster, listening in mounting dismay as the boat drove further and further away, the drone of its engine growing fainter and fainter. He rounded the corner of the path, stopping as he did. Crow stood by the

beach, facing the water. Next to him on the ground was the cowboy, his face covered in blood. *What the hell happened here?*

Marcus studied the scene silently, his nervous little eyes searching for clues. The only one not present here was the fat one. But why would the fat one steal the boat? He obviously didn't like the cowboy, because the fat man had blown a hole in his chest. But why didn't he kill Crow? Maybe he didn't have any bullets. Or maybe he respected Crow enough *not* to kill him. Marcus noticed that the box of money was gone to. That made perfect sense. The fat one killed the cowboy, and took the money. He didn't want to split it, so he left his boss alone with a sheriff in the most inhospitable places on Earth. That proved it. There really is no honor among thieves.

Marcus raised the gun and pointed it at Crow. "I got you now Crow." Crow slowly turned around, his face blank and his eyes vacant. When he had finished spinning, he grinned. *I hate that grin!* "You'd better wipe that off your face before I blow your goddamn lips off!" Crow took a step toward Marcus, his facial expression like marble. "You don't want to kill me." Marcus scowled. "Like hell I don't!" Crow chuckled softly as if Marcus had made a joke. "You don't get it do you? We're trapped. Like mice." Crow motioned toward the swamp around him. "And this is our trap." He took another step toward Marcus. Marcus pointed at his face but was dismayed to find that his hands were shaking like a drunk's. "It won't be long before the jaw comes down and snags us sheriff. You can feel it. You can feel the evil in this swamp. It's everywhere. But here is the real question sheriff. If you kill me, whose going to keep you company during the night?"

The question hit Marcus like a ton of bricks. The sun was nearly set, with only ten minutes of sunlight left. And they would be here overnight. Marcus lowered his gun a little and looked to his left, where the black water and muck bubbled and churned. The muck reminded him of a scary movie he'd seen as a child, where swamp monsters rose up from the water and attacked the unsuspecting townspeople. Marcus's adult imagination conjured up tall, moss covered beasts with long arms and sharp fangs, creatures from a true black lagoon. He pushed these thoughts away and lifted his gun up all the way again, focused once more on the serial killer before him. After a moment of deep thought, Marcus came upon a decision. "I'm not going to kill you. I want to see you rot in the Louisiana State Prison for the rest of your life." Crow smiled as if he expected this from a balding, obese sheriff. "Good choice sheriff. You can put your gun down now if you'd like. Marcus scoffed. "You'd like that wouldn't you? No. You're coming over here with me. Let's go." Marcus moved forward, limping. Crow stood still and let Marcus get behind him.

Marcus shoved him with his free hand, and the skinny outlaw stumbled forward. "Hands where I can see them. Move!" Marcus delivered the last word with a swift kick in Crow's ass, which made the man stumble and nearly trip over his own feet. Marcus stopped him at the tree where they hid the money, motioning toward the ground with the barrel of his gun. "Take a seat Mr. Crow." Crow did, sitting on a growth of moss on the cancerous looking tree. Marcus stood across from him, trying to think of what to do next. "We need a fire." Looking up at Marcus, Crow smiled. "I got

you covered sheriff. I brought along firewood when I came out here. I didn't now how long I was going to have to wait for you." Marcus nodded. "Good. Where's it at?" "By the carcass of your friend." Marcus's eyes lit up with recognition. He had forgotten about Johnson. He turned and limped over, forgetting about Crow for a second. He reached Johnson, who lay spread out like an eagle, blood welling up from the holes in his shirt.

Marcus leaned down the best he could, checking his pulse. Johnson was still alive. Marcus leaned over the face of his fellow officer. He was breathing, but his breath was congested and labored. His eyes flickered, but remained most of the way shut. "Jesus." Marcus dragged Johnson away from the water, wanting to take care of Johnson's wounds. He ripped Johnson's shirt open, which was already weak from taking buck shot head on. Marcus gasped. Johnson's chest looked like someone had beaten it, like you would to tenderize meat. From his tree, Crow spoke up. "You can't save him. You have no bandages, no drugs. He's going to die." Marcus looked at Crow, his eyes ablaze. *"Shut up! Just shut the fuck up! This is your fault. All of this! It's your fault!"* Marcus looked back down toward Johnson, his mind searching for something to do about this. But deep down, he knew Crow was right. Nothing could be done now. Johnson was dieing. He would be dead in a few hours. He knew that he had to focus on the tasks at hand, like watching Crow and stopping the bleeding in his leg. After a few moments of helpless thinking, Marcus decided to give up. He leaned close to Johnson. *"Hang in there buddy. Back up will be here soon. I promise."*

The fire burnt hot, and the shadows cast by its flickering flame seemed to dance in delight at Marcus's predicament. Marcus sat across from Crow, who was leaning on the trunk of the tree, staring at Marcus. They had sat this way for an hour, not talking, not moving. Night had drawn its veil over the bog, and along with it, fear had crept into Marcus's heart. With darkness came the inevitable silence. The clearing they sat in seemed to be a bubble of sorts, blocked out from the outside world. Even the river, which had been roaring in the daytime, had gone mysteriously silent. And Marcus didn't like. He was scared, but he didn't now of what. It wasn't Crow, though Crow was a very dangerous man. Marcus was a superstitious man, or even an imaginative man. He believed things he could touch, or feel, or taste. But, the feeling that seemed to sit on his chest was could not be experience with the standard senses. It was beyond that, a feeling that was pure emotion, pure instinct. And, like any good cop, he believed instinct.

"What's your name sheriff?" Marcus looked at Johnson in surprise. The murderer had been silent until now, and the normal question surprised him. "What?" Crow smiled. "I can't just call you sheriff all the time. You must have a name." Marcus raised an eyebrow and looked at Crow. What was he trying to do? *Nothing. He just wants to know your name!* The voice in his head nearly made him jump. He's trying to do nothing!? He didn't believe that. Men like Crow were always doing something. *Just because he's a killer, doesn't mean you can't be nice to him. He's your only company out here. You'd better be nice to him.* Marcus smiled in spite of himself. He was arguing with himself. This swamp was making him lose his mind.

"Marcus. Sheriff Marcus Stein." Crow smiled and nodded, "Good! Very good! Was that really so hard Marcus?" Marcus frowned. "I would ask you your name, but I already know it. As does everyone else in America." Crow nodded. "Unfortunately, your right. My business just has to be everybody's business." Marcus didn't lose his frown. "Murder is your business." Crow nodded and grinned even wilder than before, as if a joke had just occurred to him. "Yeah, and business is *good!"* Crow threw back his head and howled with laughter at his disgusting joke. *What happened to the quiet genius he's portrayed as? Certainly not here.* After Crow stopped laughing he looked back at Marcus, as if he was waiting for a reply. "Why did you do it?" Crow cocked his head like a curious puppy. "Do what?" Marcus scowled. "Don't play stupid! You know *exactly* what I'm talking about! The people you killed! All of them!"

Crow nodded as if someone had just explained something very difficult to him. "Listen Marcus. What makes you think I have a reason?" Marcus looked at Crow in disbelief. Out of all the answers he expected from a deranged psychopath, that was *not* one of them. "No reason. You killed all those innocent people for no reason at all!?" Crow nodded. "That's right. I woke up one morning and decided to do it." Marcus felt himself shaking with anger. *I'm going to kill him.* "It's like when someone decides to wear a turtleneck sweater instead of a hooded sweatshirt. Or it's like when you decide you make decaf instead of regular coffee for your morning shit." Marcus could barely contain himself now. He felt like a tea kettle about ready to explode. Crow murdered friends, people his wife knew, people of his

town, his county, his *state* for god sakes. And he was tossing it away like life didn't matter, like it was a crumpled piece of paper, or a napkin after a big meal. "It was totally spontaneous and random. It was one of those *What The Hell* moments!" On *What the Hell,* Crow shrugged wildly. His words were pouring out of his mouth, his eyes dancing as they stared at Marcus, knowing his words were hitting, knowing that his words were striking the weak spots between his armor. "I do that all the time." Crow stopped, cocking his head again, his huge eyes unblinking. "Who knows? Maybe one day *you'll* have one of those moments." Marcus lost it.

He leapt over the fire, ignoring the flare up of his leg, ignoring everything except for his want, no his *need* to kill John Crow. Crow was expected such a lunge. He moved like a ghost, a grin spreading across his face. Crow sidestepped and Marcus's wild lunge hit nothing but thin air. He almost smacked into the tree, but he managed to move his weight at the last second. He instead tumbled as his weak legs hit the slippery mud. He smacked the ground on his stomach, his face smashing into the muddy that lead into the side of the bog. Marcus scrambled up, only to have Crow kick him in the back on his knee. His knee bent and he went down on one knee. Suddenly Crow was behind him, one slim, muscular arm wrapped around his throat. Crow whispered into his ear as he squeezed. *"Your time is up sheriff. You're mine now."* Marcus gasped for air, his windpipe closing as Crow squeezed. Black spots scattered across his vision, and Marcus felt his world began to tilt dangerously. Then a gun shot near him. Crow howled in rage and pain, and he let go of Marcus's throat. Marcus gasped for air,

sucking in large amounts as dizziness danced through his head. He clawed at his throat as if he could open up his neck and let oxygen pour in. Then slowly, Marcus stood up and turned toward Crow, who was lying on the ground, his hand on his shoulder, his face cringing in pain. Marcus spun and looked back toward the other side of the clearing. Johnson stood, his shirt hanging in shreds, his hair tousled, swaying back and forth as if a wind blew past them him, and he was about to fall over. He held his revolver outward, his arm shaking. His face was a mask of pain, his eyes glazed over as if he were drunk.

"Johnson!" Marcus stumbled over, his head still feeling light. He made it two whole feet before stopping. Johnson had pointed the gun at him. "Stop! Don't move!" Marcus went to move. "Johnson-"Johnson's face twisted with anger. *"I SAID DON'T MOVE!"* He screamed, swaying drunkenly. Marcus took a step anyhow. "Listen Johnson. You've lost a lot of blood, and you're sick. You need help. You're hallucinating." Marcus took a step forward. Johnson's gun arm faltered, and he didn't say anything. Marcus took another baby step forward. And stopped in fear. Johnson seen the fear in Marcus's face and raised the gun again. *"WHAT!? WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING AT?"* "Don't move Johnson." Marcus's voice shook like an earthquake. Fear was on him like a curtain after the third act. A tentacle had snaked out of the water.

It rose from the water, three feet in the air. It was thick and muscular, large suction cops spread up and down. On the end was a thorn, or what appeared to be a thorn. Long, sharp and red, curved from the end of

the tentacle. It danced as the tentacle danced, searching for prey. Marcus was frozen. He had his gun, but this hideous and out of place tentacle froze him in place. The tentacle paused three feet up, the end of the tentacle dipping like the end of a finger. Then it shot down, no longer with a slow sluggishness, but with a speed of a tiger or an eagle. Marcus unfroze but it was too late. The tentacle wrapped around Johnson's ankle, the thorn digging into the meat of Johnson's ankle. Johnson screamed, and looked down, the gun in his hand completely forgotten. Marcus listened in horror as the tentacle tightened. Johnson reached down, dropping the gun to the ground. He grabbed the tentacle which didn't move away, just tightened more. Then came the sound of someone taking a bite of a juicy apple. Johnson screamed loudly, and the tentacle pulled back, pulling taut. The force of the tentacle brought Johnson to his stomach, Johnson still screaming. It pulled and Marcus rushed over, grabbing Johnson's outstretched hands. *"Oh God! Oh God!"* Johnson's screams were high and primal, and they sent shivers down Marcus's spine. Marcus dropped to his butt, grabbing one of Johnson's outstretched hands. Marcus dug his feet in, pulling with all the muscle he possessed. The tentacle's strength was unnatural, and it pulled Marcus, throwing up with as his boots carved lines in the mud as the tentacle pulled him. Johnson screamed intensified as the crisp biting noise sounded once again. *His bone. It's biting through his bone. The teeth are in the tentacles!* Marcus had enough. "Crow! Get over here and help me!" He glanced back to see the serial murderer sitting on the ground, his face white and his eyes wide with fear. "Get over here!" Though they were

foes, Crow scrambled up, running over. He slid like a baseball player to grab Johnson's other hand. The tentacle had pulled Johnson in all the way up to his waist. His legs were hidden under water now. With Crow and Marcus both pulling, the tentacle seemed to stop pulling for a second. Suddenly another tentacle rose from the water, dancing like a snake charmer had been calling it. Then, on the other side of Johnson's body, a third tentacle rose up out of the bog. It snaked through the air toward Crow, its thorn looking claw pointing directly toward him. It moved closer and Marcus seen its suction cup looking things open with hungry mouths. Small teeth lined the entire circle of the circle shaped suction cup. It snaked down toward Crow's leg, the suction cops opening and closing. Crow screamed, letting got of Johnson's hand. He scooted backward like his shoes were on fire. Johnson thought like calling for him and then he looked back toward the water. The other tentacle was moving toward him, its tiny mouths opening and closing hungrily. Marcus screamed and released Johnson's hand. Johnson was dragged back rapidly, his hands grabbing uselessly at the mud, screaming and pleading God to save him. Johnson disappeared under the water, his head last. The other two searching tentacles snaked back under water. Marcus sat, breathing heavily. Silence filled the air. Then Johnson started screaming again. He was underwater, but his muffled screams wafted up, high, horrific screams of terror and pain.

Silence. Marcus stared at the water, sitting next to Crow. The two men had forgotten everything that had happened before. It didn't matter now. The fire danced and seemed to celebrate, as if the show that the

tentacles gave made it happy. Dinner and a show. “What the hell was that thing?” Crow whispered. Marcus shook his head. He didn’t now. This was Louisiana. Louisiana didn’t have any fucking octopuses. And that wasn’t like an octopus tentacle at all. Octopus tentacles didn’t have those weird claws or teeth in the fucking suction cups. That thing was not natural. It was some freak transformation that the poison in this swamp had produced. Like nuclear waste or something.

“I don’t know Crow. It wasn’t natural.” Crow nodded, as if the statement was new, and not the most obvious thing someone ever said. “What are we going to do sheriff?” Marcus almost laughed, though he didn’t feel like, and this was not he time to be laughing. Crow’s voice was that of a child’s, a child that was really and truly scared. And serial killers didn’t normally talk like that. “How are we going to stop if those tentacles come after us?” Crow looked sideways to Marcus. “Or what if the thing that those tentacles are attached to come out? What would that thing look like?” Marcus didn’t want to think about it. “We need sleep Crow. We can take turns.” Crow nodded. “I’ll go first.” Marcus drew his revolver. He handed it to Crow, butt out. “Can I trust you Crow?” Crow looked at Marcus in surprise. Then he smiled. “You don’t need to worry sheriff. I’ll stay awake.” Marcus didn’t smile. “I don’t mean that. Can I trust you not to kill me in my sleep?” Crow’s smile vanished. “I think of you as my ally until we get out of here. If I kill you, then I have to deal with whatever monstrosities that comes out of that bog alone.” Marcus raised an eyebrow. “Monstrosities? As in more than one kind? What makes you think there’s more than one kind?”

Crow smiled once again. “Because I doubt that hell only has one kind of demon.”

The night was cold. Crow guessed that the temperature had dropped 30 degrees at least since the sun had set. Crow eyed the gun in his hand. Would he even need it? He knew that whatever the hell feasted on the other cop would be back. And soon. Crow leaned forward, tossing a log onto the fire. He was getting low on fire wood. He didn’t know how long it was going to take Marcus and the deputy to arrive, so he brought firewood just in case. He hadn’t expected to spend the night out here. His plan had worked. Well, sort of. He had underestimated Gordon. He had thought him a weak and doughy henchman, a man that could be poked and prodded to do what you wanted him to do. He had been wrong. Slim was trustworthy, but Slim was crazy. Slim was fifteen years younger than himself. He had found Slim on the streets of New York, murdering a cat. Slim had lit the cat’s tail on fire, and was watching it gleefully as it spat and spun, trying to escape its own flaming tail. He had raised Slim as his own, teaching him everything he knew. Slim was truly insane, and Crow didn’t realize it until the man grew older. And that had been a mistake, Slim was- *“Crow.”* Someone had whispered his name.

“Crow.” It came again, louder, but still a whisper. Crow looked at Marcus. The sheriff slept soundly, snoring like a bear. Was the sheriff messing with him? He pushed the thought away. The sheriff was a lot of things, but a jokester was not one of them. *“Crow!”* The voice was much louder now, an arrogant demanding of his attention. Crow stood slowly,

watching his arm. The dead deputy had put a bullet through the meat left arm, tearing the front and ripping through the back cleanly. Crow had cleaned it the best he could, wrapping it up with a piece of his shirt. He picked up the revolver, pulling the hammer back. *"Crow!"* Extremely demanding now, angry even. The voice was coming from the swamp. The swamp bubbled and spat, its black color suddenly glowing luminously. It had started glowing a bright, neon green since night had taken hold of the swamp. It lit up the night with its nuclear color, and Crow was extremely nervous. He took a step toward it. *It's digesting the deputy. That's why it's glowing. It glows when it's finishing eating.* That was nonsense. That kind of stuff only existed in science fiction stories, on planets with two headed monster and scaly lizard men. *Who knows? They might be coming out of the bog soon.*

"Come home Crow. You belong here with us. Down below. Home. We need you Crow." Crow raised the revolver, pointing it at the bog. Then, the trees above rustled. Crow spun, suddenly scared, more scared than he'd ever been in his life. He pointed toward the sky, where a few giant trees stood high in the sky. The tree that they had been sitting under shook violently, the black leaves it had spawned shaking. *Black leaves!? What in God's name is this place?* To his left, a second tree began to shake, throwing its dark leaves down upon Crow. High above, something laughed. It was high and shrill, like a monkey that was playing. Crow spun that way, his world spinning, and his head pounding. Crow wasn't used to fear; considering he was a man that was used to making others fear him. *"Give*

up John. You can't win." The single voice of the swamp had become many, low and droning, its tone dry and terrifying. *"We always win. The hunger always wins. We will break you Crow. We will break you like the thousands of others. We own you Crow."* The trees were shaking violently, and Crow screamed out. Crow glimpsed a tail slide out the leaves, long and hairy. It was thick and muscular, curled at the end like a pigs. It disappeared again and the things in the trees laughed.

Crow lost it. He fired into the growth of the trees wildly, hoping to kill one of the things up there, or at least to wound it. Marcus sat up; jerking awoke at the sound of gunshots. "DIE!" Crow seemed, pulled the trigger over and over again. Marcus looked at Crow blankly for a second, and then his tired, blood shot eyes widened. "Crow! Stop!" Marcus scrambled up, limping wildly. Crow didn't even hear him; He kept pulling the trigger until the hammer clicked empty. He stood, panting, the gun still pointing into the trees. Marcus grabbed the revolver and jerked it from his grasp. "Have you lost your mind?" Crow looked at Marcus, his eyes wild. "There're up there sheriff. I see one!" Marcus scowled. "Seen what?" A chuckle came from the treetops, a hideous mockery of human laughter. "Jesus! What the hell was *that?"* Crow shook his head and looked up into the trees. "We have to get out of here. I can't take it anymore." Marcus looked at Crow. "You need some sleep Crow. I think after a few hours rest you'll feel better." He patted Crow on back. Crow nodded. "I'll try." Crow walked past Marcus and toward the tree. He laid down several feet from it, scooting uncomfortably close to the dwindling fire. Marcus looked back up toward the trees. Something

snorted in one of the tops. Marcus closed his eyes and sighed. “God help us.” But God didn’t answer.

After an hour, the presence in the trees was gone. Marcus watched, loading the pistol with the last of the bullets in his belt. The bog had grown quiet again, and the quiet made Marcus impatient. And scared. Once it quiet the things seemed to flock to them. First the tentacles. Then the laughing things in the trees. This place was pure evil. Strange evil. Marcus felt as if he was on another planet, possibly Planet X, along with the tentacles and the laughing man-eaters. He leaned against the tree, looking down at Crow. Crow was a calm and quiet genius. People said his I.Q. was over 150. They said that’s what drove him to the murders. Marcus doubted that Crow’s giant brain could handle much more of this. Marcus closed his eyes. *Just for a second. A little rest for me. I deserve it.* Something plopped in the water. Marcus jerked his eyes open. The black water where the tentacles had dragged Johnson in was rippling. Something had either fallen in it, or something was coming up. Marcus prayed it wasn’t the latter. He stood up, favoring his hurt leg. He had taken off his belt, tightening it around the wound to stop bleeding. Marcus felt like infection were crawling inside of it. He didn’t want that. He moved forward slowly, the revolver in hand. If one of those tentacles rose up, he would blow it in half. Then, if the tentacles owner came up, he would put a bullet into his own skull. The water stilled, the rippling gone. Marcus stopped. He watched the water warily. He was beginning to move away from the fear and towards a cold feeling of indifference. He would either get out of here alive, or get taken by whatever

was in the bog. Once again, Marcus prayed that it wasn't the latter. Marcus took another step hesitantly. Then the water rippled up. Then something began to rise from it.

Marcus gasped and stumbled back. A head rose from the water, a human head by the looks of it. The top came first, rising slowly. It was black and neon green, covered in the mold that grew on the top of the bog water, dark and grotesque. Then the thing's face rose into few, but it wasn't anything like a human face. The face was a hunk of the black mold, but two eyes shone through. They shined and danced two eyes that had no pupil, and also had no iris. Marcus looked into those eyes, and he seen horror within them, things that no mortal man had ever seen. Insanity was the light that shone through, evil that had no end, evil that was infinity. Marcus dropped the gun and soiled himself simultaneously. He stood, his mind tottering on his own insanity, a prospect the remains of his intelligence found appealing. He shook as the thing waded out, seven foot of the green and black mold that seemed to make up the mold of a human, two arms and two legs. The eyes kept Marcus's gaze, doorways into another universe, a universe of malevolence and madness. Marcus was screaming, high and shrill, a scream of someone with nothing left, a head of muck that held as much intelligence as the mud that made up the bog. Crow woke up then, and he caught the thing's eyes. He clenched his eyes shut, screaming and clawing at his eyes with his nails, blood welling up, and ripping flesh off his face in chunks. Behind the first creature came others like it, made of the bog, lords of muck and mud, ushers to a world far different from ours.

Their eyes shone the nuclear green, like the muck on top of the swampy water. The first one stopped before Marcus. A drone filled the air, a sound that the bog emitted, and a sound that the creatures emitted. It was so loud that blood rushed from Marcus's ears, gushes of it that rushed down the side of his face, hot and thick. The first creature reached down with the black hands of a giant and grabbed Marcus's head, like a catcher's mitt on a baseball. The thing squeezed and Marcus's head imploded under its grasp, his head popping like a tomato. Blood flew out and his head expelled a juicy breaking sound. The creature released Marcus's crumpled head and Marcus's body crumpled. With that, the creatures turned, wading into the swamp like they had come out. They didn't even acknowledge Crow. He was for the things in the trees.

Crow sat the way he was for an hour or longer, his face his hands, curled up in the fetal position. His mind was strained and stretched, and exhaustion ran through his bones. The things never came back, and Crow slowly lifted his head up. The fire had nearly died, but it still cast out a sick light over the clearing. Crow slowly sat up, his eyes swollen from crying. "Marcus?" He looked back and forth over the clearing, stopping finally on the crushed head and the splayed out body of the late sheriff. Crow slowly got up, his body shaking. Something in the tree above him laughed. Crow screamed in terror, tripping forward. He spun his hair wild and his eyes big and scared. He screamed up at the trees. *"LEAVE ME ALONE! GO! LEAVE ME ALONE!"* Crow began to blubber, the tears running down his face and snot running out of his nose. "I got to get out of here," He whispered,

stumbling forward. “I’m going to swim out of here!” He stumbled, his body failing him. He made his way slowly down the path, oblivious of the things coming from the trees, following him in the shadows, laughing like hyenas.

Crow reached the curve in the path. He stumbled and fell, going to his knees, catching himself with one of his hands. The things stopped when he fell, chuckling to themselves. Crow slowly got up, repeating *‘I got to get out of here’* over and over again. He stumbled down the path, eventually reaching the edge of the water. Adam’s corpse was gone, no doubt dragged off by one of the creatures of the bog. Crow reached the rushing river, standing before it, swaying back and forth. Finally his legs gave way and he collapsed to the mud. He sat that way; his head tilted back, his head spinning. The things moved, no longer timid, lured by the weakness they smelled. Crow stared at the water, his eyes blank, almost as blank as his mind. Slowly, Crow turned his head, drool running from his open lips. One of the things moved from the shadows. The thing was the size of a dog, red scaly skin, hands walking on hands with bent, twisted limbs. The long hairy tail that Crow glimpsed wagged excitedly, still curled at the end. The worst thing of all was the monster’s face, pallid and bare. It had clear high features with eyes that shone like the creatures from the swamps. The thing smiled with its pale lips, revealing a mouth of long, dagger like fangs. It opened its mouth and laughed. Behind it, its fellow beast answered the call, a call like wolves, one to bring its other kind to a meal. They moved in and Crow opened his mouth to scream but it was caught off as they leapt onto him.

Deputy Joey Riemann moved up the path, followed closely by the other deputy and two extremely unhappy state troopers. The leader, a mustached man that insisted on being called Jack spoke up. "There isn't shit here deputy. You think this is a joke. Joey stopped, putting his hands on his hips. The clearing was empty, but the remains of a campfire still smoldered. Morning had come to the swamp, and when Johnson and the sheriff hadn't shown up, Joey went to the state troopers. But all that was here was a few smoldering pieces of wood and footprints in the mud. No bodies or anything of that matter. "I swear Jack. This is where they were going to be. The sheriff explained this to us for more than a half an hour. Jack frowned and looked at the other troopers, who just smiled because they just thought him a stupid and confused redneck.

Joey turned to the other deputy of Bearly, a newer man named Brian. Brian looked at him blankly. Joey rolled his eyes and turned back to the troopers. "I'm sorry. They must be somewhere else. We can head back-"The swamp jumped. Joey whipped toward the sound, and the sticky *plopping* sound made Joey feel uneasy. Jack looked past Joey. "What the hell was *that?"* Joey reached down to his belt, drawing his revolver. He suddenly had a bad feeling, just like the feeling he had right before they busted down Crow's hotel room door. "I don't know." Joey moved slowly and the other officers followed, each drawing their revolvers. Joey moved over to the edge of the water, waiting for the black and thick muck to move again. He leaned over it, crouching down. He squinted into the muck, expecting to see the remains of Johnson or the sheriff. The stagnant water remained calm, and

Johnson frowned. The other officers had moved around the back of him, looking over his shoulder like curious children. Joey moved closer, until his face was inches away from the water. The smell made his nose tingle and his eyes water, but Joey kept searching. He was going to get the glory for any bodies found, not the state pricks. Jack spoke up behind him. “See anything?” Joey shook his head. “I don’t-“The water bubbled then, like somebody blowing bubbles in their chocolate milk with a straw. “Hold on! I think I-“ A tentacle burst from the water.

It Came From The Sky

Gary looked up from the radio just as he saw the man sitting cross-legged in the middle of the road. He cursed and yanked the wheel. His truck began to flip and Gary closed his eyes as the world spun. As it rolled he heard something that sounded like explosions all around him as the glass imploded into the truck and the ceiling gave in. A sudden flash of pain on the top of his head brought him to the point of passing out. *I'm going to die,* were Gary's last thoughts before the world went black.

The gentile *swish swish* of the windshield wipers brought Gary back to consciousness. He slowly opened his heavy eyelids and looked at the sight of an upside-down view of his front windshield wipers moving left to right. He groaned and picked up his head. Gary cried out as the same sharp pain he had felt before rushed through his head. *Got to think rationally Gary. You got to get out of here and call the police.* He picked up one of his hands from the ceiling and ran it though his hair. He felt glass shards fall out and was horrified to find that his hair was filled with a thick, warm, sticky fluid. Gary knew what it was before he looked at his hand. It was blood. He took his other hand and fumbled for the seat belt button, which he hit as soon as his finger found it. He cried out again as he dropped down onto to the hard metal ceiling. He moved his legs down far enough so that he could crawl out the driver side window. Gary crawled out on his elbows, listening to the glass crinkle underneath his weight.

Gary made it out onto the snow and used the truck to pull himself onto his feet. The winter air was frigid, and as soon as he crawled out of the wreck of his truck, an icy wind blew by, sending shivers down his spine. He looked out into the darkness of the woods, where shadows reigned and the dead trees stood as forlorn sentinels. Gary looked at his damaged truck and he felt rage build up in his body. He had been driving home from his parent's house after a nice Christmas meal. And now this! Gary swore under his breath. It was just his luck. He looked up and down the dirt road and knew he would never be able to get phone reception out here. His parent's house was seated comfortably in the middle of the forest where barely three or four houses still stood.

He had decided to take the long way back home through the old dirt roads. He had taken the road for a simple reason, one that he found himself doing as the years past and his body got older and older. The forest was normally a beautiful sight, especially when snow covered the limbs of the trees like frosting; the world looked as if it belonged in a snow globe. But on this night, things hadn't seemed tight. The beauty of he forest usually made Gary calm, but something about it tonight made him feel anxious and the wreck didn't help matters any.

Gary took a step forward and his foot crunched a piece of glass, bringing his mind back to a half-ton of crushed metal he had just crashed. Why had he wrecked in the first place? Then he remembered. He looked at the man sitting in the road. The man sat in a big winter coat, a furry hood over his head, his face looking down at the ground. He was sitting in an

Indian Style position, the exact same position he had been sitting in when Gary had almost hit him. Gary looked up toward the truck the man had been driving, a tiny red pick-up truck. It was parked at a weird angle, the side door still wide open. The only light on that road was the light coming from the front of the truck. It cut through the darkness like a warm knife through butter.

Gary's only emotion at the moment was a red-hot anger. And he had just the place to let it out. *"What are you crazy!?"* Gary yelled, his voice filling the night. He walked closer to the man until he was a couple of steps away. *"You could have gotten us both killed! What kind of crazy person just sits out here in the middle of the road to get run over?"*

Gary looked at the man in astonishment. He had not moved. The man had stayed in the exact same position he had been in before, his face hidden and his hands deep in his sleeves. Gary began to feel uneasy. *Just get in his truck and drive away. This man isn't your problem! Let him be the police's problem,* a loud voice in his head told him. He didn't realize he had taken a step toward the truck until he had done it. *Don't do that,* the sane voice in his head told him, *Stay with him until someone arrives. There is something wrong with him.*

Gary crouched down next to the man and tried to peer under his hood. "Sir?" Gary said, his voice becoming as concerning as he could make it. "Is there something wrong?" The man still remained the same, and Gary sighed. He had tried to talk to him and that was the most important thing. He began to stand up when the man raised his head. Gary's breath seized

up and his knees bent. He crumpled to the ground on his butt, and he slowly scooted away from the horrible sight in front of him. Half of the man's face was gone. The right side had been reduced to a jagged looking flesh. His eye was completely gone, as was half of his mouth. That side of his face had been reduced to a bloody pulp. It appeared as if it had been *torn* off. Regaining his senses a little bit; Gary moved a little bit closer. "What happened to you?" Gary asked, trying to keep his voice from shaking. The man regarded Gary with his one good eye, while the red inflamed side began to ooze blood. "It came from the sky." The man said slowly, almost as if Gary wouldn't understand if he talked any faster.

It came from the sky? What did that mean? What was there that was big enough to do this? For all the knowledge that Gary had about wildlife, he could not think of anything that flew that could do this kind of damage. This had looked like a bear, or maybe a mountain lion had done it. But something that flew? Maybe he hadn't heard the man right. "What?" Gary moved closer to the man for better hearing. "Wha-"A sudden gush of wind and the sound of metal creaking filled the air and Gary jumped. He spun around toward his truck and immediately wished he hadn't.

Sitting on the bottom of his truck was a bird. Except it wasn't. It appeared to be a man with big leathery wings that covered up its body like a big coat. The wings were a light red color, with a long bone on the top of both of them that curved around so that the wings were draped over its body. The face was hidden behind the leather-like wings, but Gary could see long knife like talon's dug deep into the metal framing of his overturned

truck. Gary felt his body began to shake and fear blanketed his entire body with cold, a cold that reached all the way down to his soul. Gary watched the thing slowly pick up his head from behind its wings and he was amazed to find blood red eyes shining brightly through the oncoming darkness. Its face was dirty, and long fangs stuck out from underneath its top lip. Its face was remarkable human except for the fangs and red eyes. It even had hair, long dirty hair that hung down covering the side of its ears. Gary now knew what had sliced off half of the man's face.

Gary tried to get up and run, but the eyes seemed to hypnotize Gary from moving. The metal on his truck creaked as the thing with bat-like wings started to rise. Gary did the one thing that he knew just might keep him alive. "Run!" Gary grabbed the man's arm and gave a tremendous yank up. He pulled the man along as he began to run, adrenaline coursing through his veins as he rushed toward the running pick-up truck. He barely managed to pull the man along, but something in his brain told him that stopping was a *very* bad move. "Come on!" He yelled again, just as he heard his truck creak loudly behind him and the hideous sound of giant wings filled the air. He heard the *whoosh* of air as the thing flew at him. *Down!* He dropped down to the ground pulling the man along with him.

Before Gary could hit the dirt, a tremendous force hit the man in the back. The man let out a howl and next thing Gary knew, he was yanked off of the ground like a ragdoll, still holding the man. Terrible pain shot through his right shoulder and down his side. His shoulder gave a loud *pop* like a cork coming out of a wine bottle. Gary screamed and he let go of the man,

dropping to the snow covered dirt road below. His face smashed down hard on the road and he felt blood start to gush out of his nose. He raised his head and watched the flying bat thing fly further and further into the dark night, the man's horrifying screams filling the silence.

He rolled over on his back and he whipped his face with his left arm. *Sweet Jesus! I think I just pulled my shoulder out!* He used his arm that didn't hurt and grabbed his right shoulder and gave it a light shake. Intense pain exploded in his shoulder and he threw back his head and screamed. He looked back up to the sky, half expecting the thing to come down again and scoop him up. Breathing heavily, Gary began to crawl toward the running truck. *Got to go. Got to get to a police station and get the police.* An idea struck him then, and he stopped crawling for a second. They wouldn't believe him. They would laugh in his face and send him to the hospital. The mental hospital. Gary pushed the thought away and continued to crawl.

Gary got closer to the truck with each passing second until he was close enough to stand up and get into it. Gary looked up into the sky and saw no sign of the thing coming back. He grabbed the running board and pulled himself up. When he was all the way up, Gary started to step into the truck. Until he saw a shotgun lying on the passenger seat. He was an avid hunter, and his eyes immediately picked up on what kind of gun it was. It was a big .12 gauge shotgun, with pump action. As Gary's eyes scanned the cab of the truck, Gary figured out a few more things. The passenger side window was busted out from the outside, scattering little pieces of glass throughout the truck cab. The cab smelled of burnt gunpowder, suggesting

the gun had been shot. Gary stood with one leg in the truck and one leg standing in the snow that covered the ground, his eyes still on the gun. *If I stay I can try to kill this thing. Or I can climb into the truck and get out of here.* A sudden screech filled the air in the direction that the thing had flown off in. He jerked his head toward the sound and thought he saw it off in the darkness.

Gary leapt into the cab and slammed the door. He stomped on the gas and the engine revved. *I'm going to get out of here! I'm going to live!* His heart plummeted as the truck sank down into the snow. He was stuck! *"NOOO!"* He pounded the wheel over and over again with his palm. He gave the gas pedal another stomp and the truck lurched out of the pothole it was stuck in. *"YES!"* He cried and looked out the windshield. His smile vanished as he saw the thing hurtling straight at the windshield. He ducked down as the thing hit the glass full force and the entire window exploded on top of him.

He raised his head and looked straight into the bright, red eyes of the bat creature. It opened its mouth, revealing an entire mouth of dagger like fangs, hissing like a snake right in Gary's face. He screamed and turned his face away from it. As he turned away, he saw the .12 gauge lying right in front of him. Gary seized it in his good hand and rolled back over, sticking the barrel right in the monster's face. Gary let out a battle cry and pulled the trigger. The gun's sound was deafening, filling the entire cab with a cannon blast. The thing's face exploded in a geyser of blood and the thing threw itself out of the windshield onto the hood. It was screaming, but Gary barely heard it over ringing in his ears. He cocked the gun again and shot

the creature square in its chest. Its enormous leathery wings went out to their full length and it rolled off the hood out of his view in front of the truck. Still yelling, Gary smashed the gas and the truck rolled forward.

A bony insect-like *crunch* sounded as Gary rolled over the creature. The truck took off, and Gary began to laugh madly. *"I got it! I got it!"* The truck ripped down the deserted dirt road, where civilization was miles away. He left the bat creature in the road, suddenly not wanting to show anyone, just wanting to escape. He thought of home, he thought of his bed, and he thought of getting far away from this nightmare. While Gary drove, things shifted in the trees, things with wings and teeth. As a frigid winter gust swayed the trees, the things took flight.

Thing in The Box

The salesman traveled in an old, rundown 1981 station wagon. It pulled into the diner, its engine rumbling and growling angrily, almost as if it was mad at its owner for a seemingly endless drive over open highways and long days. The car was barely running, and the engine didn't even rev as its owner slowly drifted into the dirt parking lot of Daisy's Diner. It rolled (ever so slowly) to a stop in front of Daisy's establishment, giving a loud and irate backfire that sounded like a giant's fart. It was dark out side, and no light shone onto the station wagon but the lights from the windows of Daisy's Diner.

Daisy's Diner is located in the Nevadan desert, another little place off the highway surviving off the money of lonely and hungry truckers, and sleepy traveling salesmen like the one that climbed from the driver's side of his station wagon. He was a tall and skinny man, gangly even. He wore a worn and faded black suit, one with patches on the elbows, something an art teacher at the local community college might wear. He looked to the right of him, where a large jacked up pick-up truck sat. Inside sat a young kid in a sleeveless flannel shirt and a cigarette in his mouth. He was leaning on the steering wheel, but as soon as he caught the traveling salesmen eyeing him, he sat up and gave him a middle finger and smiled crookedly.

The traveling salesmen frowned and walked to the back of his station wagon and opened the hatch. He rummaged among boxes of items, eventually coming up with a plain cardboard box, about twice the size of a shoe box. The traveling salesman smiled down at the box, cradling it in his long, gooney arms lovingly. He lifted up one of the corners of box with one long, slender finger, peeking inside. He cooed down into it like you would to a baby. “I love you, oh yes I do.” The light from the front window of the diner shone on him, his long, thin face bright and happy, his big, round eyes full of compassion. He then closed the box and reached up and slammed the hatch. The traveling salesman walked around the back of the pick-up truck, the kid inside eyeing him strangely, not quite sure what to expect from such a tall, funny looking figure cooing to the inside of a box.

The traveling salesman opened the front door of the diner, the box cradled in his arms. He was immediately swarmed by the sweet smells of strong coffee, bacon frying, and the stall and cool of an air conditioner running full blast to hold the hot desert air that would soon surround the lonely diner. The traveling salesman scanned the diner with his moon sized eyes, still smiling like a man that was in love. On the right side of the diner was a long string of booths, only with two people in them, just truckers eating a breakfast before heading back onto the road. On the opposite side of the diner was a bar with red stools that ran down it, just like ones you would see in any other 50’s style imitation across the United States of America. Behind the bar were the grill and the cook, a big, fat man with a greasy white smock and one hell of a five o’clock shadow. Only one man sat

on the stools, a kid with ruffled blond hair and a leather jacket thrown over a dirty tee-shirt.

The traveling salesman walked across the diner, sitting two stools away from the kid that looked like he walked directly out of a James Dean movie. The salesman put his cardboard box on the bar next to him, rubbing his big hands together as if he wanted to warm them. A waitress walked over, looking extremely bored and tired. “What can I get you?” The salesman smiled towards her, his charming smile kicking in. “Let me think.” He glanced away quickly and then turned back toward the waitress. “Can I get some scrambled eggs, bacon, and maybe two pieces of toast?” The waitress scribbled it on her little pad and then looked back the salesmen expectantly. “Anything to drink sir?” The salesman nodded. “Just some of that delicious smelling coffee over there,” He paused for a moment, “Please and thank you.” The waitress nodded. “Right away.” She turned and walked away.

The kid on the stool looked over toward the salesman. His bright blue eyes looked the skinny man up and down and then towards the box. He smiled suddenly, revealing a full set of yellow, crooked teeth. “How’s it going fella?” The salesman looked at the kid, surprise flashing over his face, and then, just as quickly as it had come; it was gone, returning him to his calm, confident self. He grinned towards the kid. “I’m doing just fine. How are you doing?” The kid smiled and nodded. “Fine.” He looked away for a second. He turned back over to the salesman and smiled. “Are you a salesman?” The salesman nodded. “That’s exactly what I do Kevin.” The

waitress came back over to the salesman, pouring him his coffee, still steaming, into the white mug in front of him. “Thank you miss.” The waitress glanced at the smiling salesman, and then walked away.

The salesman blew on his coffee, the steam parting for his breath. The kid named Kevin looked dumbfounded. “How do you know my name?” Fear was evident in the kid’s voice, a nervous fear that had snuck on. The salesman looked over and smiled. Something in his big moon eyes sparkled. “Lucky guess.” The kid sat quietly, letting the strange comment sink in. Kevin dismissed the guess as parlor tricks, just like when the man guessed your weight or your age. “That’s neat little trick. Who taught you how to do that?” Kevin said in a mocking tone, as if he was speaking to a little child. The salesman looked back toward Kevin. His grin was gone, and his face was stern. “How about you shut the hell up and get out of my face.” The salesman turned back to his coffee. Kevin sat for a moment, surprised at the salesman’s sudden change in tone. Then, he scooted over to the stool next to him. The salesman ignored him. Kevin sat silently as the waitress brought over the salesman’s plate, with three strips of black bacon, burnt toast, and a little pile of scrambled eggs. The salesman picked up the toast, tearing a piece off. With Kevin watching, the salesman lifted the corner of the box up, dropping the piece of bread into it. He quickly closed the lid. The box was completely still for a moment, and then it gave a sudden jolt, as if something inside had moved quickly, making the box jump forward.

Kevin watched this, the surprise evident on his face. The salesman lifted his fork to eat when the kid spoke. “What’s in the box?” The

salesman sighed and shook his head. He turned toward Kevin, his anger quite clear. “None of your damn business.” He went to eat his food once again. The kid glanced over his own shoulder toward the truck in the parking lot, the one parked next to the salesman’s station wagon. The kid inside motioned with a sweep of his hand. Kevin nodded. “Fine.” He said toward the salesman. He reached his hand into his jacket and pulled out a gun.

Kevin stood up, brandishing the .9mm toward the cook. “Give me all the money in the cash register.” The fat cook gasped in surprise. The truckers made a movement as if to escape and Kevin turned on them with the gun, his eyes wild. “Where do you two think you are going?” The truckers sat back, averting there eyes. He brought the gun back towards the direction of the salesman. He grinned. “Change your mind about giving me the box?” The salesman slowly spun on the stool towards Kevin. “You’ll have to kill me first.” The salesman’s face was stern and his eyes dared Kevin to do something or step away. Kevin stared at the salesman and his grin grew. “That sounds like a dare. I *never* back away from a dare.” The kid pulled the trigger. The bullet caught the salesman’s left eye, the force of the bullet ripping open the left side of his face. The bullet exited on an upward curve blowing the salesman’s brain through the top of his head like an explosion had gone off. Blood painted the back wall next to the grill, which sizzled as pieces of flesh hit the hot surface. The waitress screamed as hot droplets peppered her skin. The salesman’s remaining eye regarded Kevin for a second before rolling into the back of his skull, his whole body tipping off

the stool, crashing to the black and white tile. He bled there, a red puddle developing quickly around Kevin's feet.

The kid brandished the gun toward the cook, who had the register open. The two truckers sat over in the booth, there eyes and mouths wide open. Kevin reached into his pocket. "Put the money in the bag. NOW!" He tossed a burlap bag, which the cook caught with one fat hand. He stuffed what little money that was in the cash register into the bag and threw it towards the kid. Kevin caught it, looking into the bag unhappily. "This is it?" He looked at the cook expectantly. The fat cook nodded. Kevin sighed. He backed way, brandishing the gun toward the truckers, and then back toward the cook and the waitress. He paused and his beady eyes shot over to the cardboard box, which once belonged to the traveling salesman, who lay on the floor, the top of his head wide open, leaking blood onto the floor. Kevin grabbed the box under his arm and backed away, still wielding the gun towards all the patrons of the restaurant. He pushed open the door and rushed into the night.

The pick-up roared to life as Kevin exited the restaurant. The driver poked his head out the window. "Jesus Kevin! Did you really have to kill someone?" Kevin ran to the side of the truck, tossing the money through the open window of the opposite side. The kid ripped the door open and climbed into the cab. He slammed the door as the driver put the truck into gear with the stick, the gears grinding as the driver backed up. The driver shook his head. "I should have gone in. You're too stupid to deal with such a simple job." The driver steered the truck onto the road, throwing gravel out

from the back tires. Kevin shook his head. “It’s wasn’t like that Rick. I wanted this box.” Kevin looked down towards it. He held it as the salesman had held it, cradling it in his arms.

Rick looked over, frowning. “What’s in it?” Kevin shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s gonna sound weird, but I had to have it. And the guy wasn’t going to give it up without a fight.” Kevin looked at Rick, his beady eyes pleading for the driver to listen to his story and believe it. “I don’t know why I wanted it so bad. It kind of drew me in. I don’t know how to explain it.” His face was a mask of confusion, as he tried to decide why he had killed a man for a cardboard box that he hadn’t the slightest idea what was in it. Rick growled impatiently. “Well quite pouting. Just open the damn thing. If the guy was going to fight you for it, it must be valuable.”

The pick-up truck tore down the road like a bat escaped from hell, all alone in the cold desert night. No light in either direction shone. Inside the cab, Kevin nodded. “You’re absolutely right Rick. We need to see what’s in it.” Kevin went to grab the corner but hesitated. Rick spotted it and laughed out loud. “Are you serious Kevin? You look scared of a cardboard box.” Kevin looked at Rick, his face full of despair. In the little light of the cab, Kevin’s face was thin and frightened, a man with a feeling, a bad feeling. “Ok Rick. I’ll open it.” He whispered. He grabbed the corner the top of the box and pulled it off.

The movement from the box was a flash, and Rick, the get-away driver of a crime spree perpetrated by two high school dropouts, immediately thought of a rabbit, darting from the bushes to escape the dogs

that pursued it. The flash moved upward, the brown furry blur that jumped at Kevin's face. Rick had just enough time to see the genuine surprise on Kevin's face before the blur latched itself onto him, covering his face like a blanket. It was the size of a cat, a brown fur ball that moved like a bullet. For a second Kevin was silent, and then he started to scream, high pitched screams of pain and horror. He clawed at the thing on his face, kicking and thrashing in his seat like he was having a seizure. Blood exploded down his shirt from underneath the body of the furry creature, blood that drenched Kevin, almost as if someone had dumped a bucket of blood down.

Rick screamed then, not thinking anymore, not thinking that he had the his foot on the accelerator, not thinking that he was applying more pressure, causing the old pick-up truck to gain speed. Rick released the wheel to grab at the thing on Kevin's face. He grabbed a handful of the brown fur, which was coarse and thick, sticky from the blood coming from Kevin's face, and hot from the thing's body heat. As Rick grabbed it, the top (which Rick figured was the head) seemed to nuzzle into his face, causing Kevin to scream more. A wet tearing sound came from underneath the thing's body, and Kevin stopped screaming, no longer thrashing in he seat. Rick tried to tear the thing away, but it had dug into Kevin's face. The truck nearly swerved off the road and Rick took his hands off the thing and grabbed a hold of the wheel. The thing's body suddenly brought its head out from Kevin's face, and Rick caught sight of the thing's face. It had a rodent like face, two beady, little eyes that were as black as coal, and a little nose covered in blood. Its mouth opened wide, revealing rows upon rows of little

pointed teeth, like you would see if you looked inside of a great white shark's mouth. It hissed like a cat would hiss, just lower and meaner, and Rick's life flashed before his eyes. The last thing that Rick seen before the thing from the box leaped was long, black claws dug into the remains of Kevin's face. The little creature had ripped both of Kevin's eyes out and all the meat on his face had been ripped off, making Kevin look like a skeleton with little bits of red flesh still clinging on. Rick barely had time to scream as the thing latched onto his face. Minutes later, the truck rolled to a stop in the middle of the deserted desert. Its headlights were the only light beside the moon, which hung in the sky like a king upon his throne.

The police vehicle stopped behind the truck, the two troopers climbing from the two sides of the cruiser, guns drawn. Officer Cooper, the driver of the cruiser motioned for his partner to follow him. Cooper walked around the driver's side, sidestepping like a good officer was trained to do. His partner did the same, just along the opposite side. Cooper's partner reached the other side, ripping it open. Kevin's body tumbled out onto the gravel along the side of the highway. One look of Kevin's face caused the officer to turn and violently clear his stomach, vomiting into the ditch. Cooper ripped the driver's side door open and barely stopped himself from following the other officer's example when he laid his eyes on the remains of Rick's face. He looked away and took a deep breath. *"My lord."* He called for back-up on his radio, why his partner gagged on the other side of the truck. Neither men seen the bloody paw prints scampered across the pavement into the desert.

By Midnight

As the bell struck three in the afternoon, the man stood in the frigid rain. The rain seemed to suck the life from the air and the sun, leading the once beautiful spring day into something dark and gothic. Above the head of the man, the church bell struck again, and again, slower each time it rung, breaking the silence like only the rain had dared to do before. He stood directly under the heavy rain fall, not bothering to lift his head to the fat drops that smacked on the soaked asphalt with a wet *splat.* The man stood motionless, his hands on his sides, a old fedora tipped forward on his head, and a long trench coat wrapped around his body, giving the man the appearance of the old time detective of the twenty's.

After the bell stopped ringing, the man looked up toward the church behind him, tilting his head back, throwing a wave of water rolling onto his back. The man stood for a second, before tearing his gaze from the bell and back forward again, once again hiding his face in the shadow of his fedora. Then he began to walk. He walked with a pronounced limp, as if his leg were made of wood, instead of muscle and bone. The man moved from his spot across the street, not bothering to look both ways before he crossed. He reached the other side of the street, where a tiny brick building stood, with a ramp leading to the front door. The man paused again, this time looking to his left where a tall sign stood. RENO PUBLIC LIBRARY, it said.

He nodded as if he agreed with the sign and descended the ramp. The overcast day seemed to darken as the man headed for the door, as if the weather itself didn't want him to enter. The rain intensified, going from a

pouring rain to torrential typhoon. By the time the man reached the door, he was completely and utterly soaking wet, his entire body drenched all the way down to his bones. He pulled open the door and slipped into the building.

Compared to the wet atmosphere of the outside, the library was heaven. Not only was the room empty of water, it was warm, with the smell of old books, a smell that the man neither liked nor disliked. The room was barely lit, a long room with dozens of enormous bookshelves to the left, and many smaller ones on his right. He moved forward, removing his hat, and shaking it, throwing rain all around. He shook his head as he walked, his thinning white hair shaking a little. He then unbuttoned the top of his trench coat, revealing a black shirt, with a white clerical collar. He was a priest.

The man continued moving, sidestepping a display that was advertising a new horror novel. The priest finally reached his destination, where a man sat behind a counter, with black framed glasses on his face, a book in hand, and his feet up on the counter. The priest stopped for a moment, waiting for recognition. When the man didn't look up from his book, the priest took it upon himself. "Mr. Crane?" The man's voice was deep and rough, but at the same time, had an edge of gentleness. The man called Crane looked up at the priest, his eyes blinking like a beetle behind his thick glasses. Not only did his eyes look like a beetle, his entire body did. The man's body was fat and round, with a face shaped like a bowling ball.

The beetle like librarian stood up quickly, tossing his book to the table onto the counter. “That’s right. But please, call me Crane. Everybody does.” Crane flashed a smile, complete with crooked, yellow teeth. “And you must be Father Knight?” Crane looked worried for a second, and then his chubby face turned pleasant once again. “And… um…” Crane tried to stutter out the sentence, his face suddenly turning grave, his eyes averting from the elderly priest’s eyes and down towards his feet. “Are you asking if I’m here concerning your brother?” Crane jerked his head and looked at Father Knight, his eyes teary. “Yes! Thank god! You came to help Jeffrey didn’t you! I didn’t know what to do! The doctors can’t do…do…anything! They just guess and I called you thinking my brother was posses…posses…” Crane tried to stutter his way through the last word, but before he could, he broke into tears, his chubby face rippling in emotion, water running down his face in streams. Knight was silent for a second and then did the first part of his job, a job he hadn’t had to do in 37 years. “Possessed Mr. Crane,” Outside, thunder rolled, showing how silent the library really was. “The word you are looking for is possessed.” Crane gave Knight a look that could melt ice, his face darkening briefly before once again breaking down.

Father Knight ignored Crane’s sobs and pressed on. “In the next five minutes my colleague will be here. In the mean time, I would like to see Jeffrey.” Crane managed to pull himself together for a second, and moved around the counter, his waddle making his body jiggle like Jell-O underneath his extra large tee-shirt. Father Knight followed Crane between two tall shelves and toward a door marked EMPLOYES ONLY. As they

walked, Crane talked. “We helped found this library, and we sleep back here some nights. It’s cheaper than paying rent for an apartment.” They pushed the door open. “My brother is usually a nice guy, but all of a sudden, he started acting a little bit…um…” Knight broke in. “Frightening?” Crane nodded. Once again, thunder rolled, though this time it was much louder and closer. They walked down a long boring hallway that had plain white walls and shiny linoleum. It smelled of Pine-Sol, but something terrible resided beneath it. As they walked, Knight’s polished shoes clicked audibility on the tile. At the end of the hallway, Crane stopped and turned toward Father Knight, his chubby hand rested on the doorknob. “I’m going to warn you Father. What’s in this room is not very pleasant.” Knight looked at Crane’s solemn face and smiled thinly. “I’ve seen possession before. I think I can handle it Mr. Crane.” Crane swallowed and sighed. He looked tired, and beneath his glasses, heavy bags hung from his eyes, and he was pale with exhaustion. “Do you think you can help him?” Knight hesitated. Then, he nodded with certainty. “It will be done by midnight tonight.” Crane nodded, licking his lips with a darting, pink tongue. “Good. I’ll pray for you father. The lord knows you’re going to need it.” With that, Crane turned the knob and opened the door.

The first thing that Father Knight smelled was excrement. The smell was powerful and assaulting, a smell that made him want to turn and leave from this room, and never return. But his attention was focused forward on the task on hand, ridding the boy named Jeffrey Crane of his demon. Father Knight closed the door behind him, taking a final look at the other Crane

before closing the door. Knight then turned toward Jeffrey, his heart sinking at the sight of the boy in front of him. “Hello Jeffrey.” The thing that was once Jeffrey grinned.

It was sitting up in its bed, it’s back propped up on the headboard, its arms crossed in its lap. Its face was long and skeletal; its eyes bulging like a bug’s in its head. It had long teeth that looked somewhat like daggers, infected and yellow, that shone as the monstrosity grinned. Jeffrey was shirtless, showing off a hollow chest, complete with ribs that stuck out from his chest. The thing’s eyes moved toward Knight, its eyes big and catlike, large and golden like a harvest moon. Its face was cut and covered with sores, sores that oozed pus and blood that mixed together into a rotten smelling concoction. *“Hello father.”* The thing’s voice was thick and guttural, with a hint of hoarseness.

Father Knight ignored the thing and walked across the room, removing his chain from his shirt, pulling the crucifix into plain sight. The thing that was once Jeffrey cackled loudly and the sound sent shivers down his spine. “*Put that away Joseph! The Jesus-man has no power! Face it Father, Jesus was not the son of God! Jesus is nothing but a-*“Knight ignored the monster as it raved, and reached his pocket, removing a vial of holy water from his coat. “SILENCE!” The monster quieted at once, its eyes wide, its grin faltering for a second.

Knight looked at the monster, holding his cross out like a weapon. “I’m going to ask you some questions. I’m here to help the soul you hold hostage.” The demon cackled. *“There is nothing left of this ‘Jeffrey’. I own*

him." The demon cocked his head. *"As your kind might say, he is my little bitch. What do you think of that father?"* Knight pressed on. "Talk means nothing demon. I've brought the lord with me, and the lord does not take your kind of his Earth kindly. I don't care who or what you are, or even where you came from. Whatever ring of Hell you normally reside in is where I shall send you back to. This I promise you demon." The thing's face rippled, and it suddenly sat up violently, spittle flying from its lips. *"YOU TELL ME NOTHING! I DO AS I PLEASE!"* Knight stepped forward, his face becoming like stone. He raised his arm and swung it downward like a slice of a sword. Water from the vial rained onto the demon and it screeched, throwing the blankets from its partially naked body. It scurried away as the water burnt his skin like battery acid, steam rising as the smell of burning flesh filled the air.

Then, as if he were talking to a child, Father Knight spoke sternly to the demon in a young man's body. "You are not in control. I am-"From behind Knight, a knock came upon the door. Knight glanced, and then looked back to the demon, which had scurried against the wall, its chest heaving and its eyes darting. "Excuse me my friend." Knight said. The thing drew its head back and hacked a pile of bloody phlegm that struck before Knight's feet with a wet *splat.* A maggot crawled from the center, wiggling toward Knight's black shoes. Knight turned away, a wave of nausea washing over him. He walked across the room as the demon began to laugh, loud, obscene brays that erupted from its cracked and bleeding lips. Knight

opened the door and slipped out, swallowing a lump that was rising in its throat.

Once in the hallway, Knight closed the door with a slam. He turned and leaned against it, sighing heavily. “Hello old friend.” Knight looked at the man before him, a short little man in a priest’s garbs. He was older, and his hairline was receding, but the remaining hair was black as night. He had a scholarly looking face, framed by wire frame glasses. He smiled, revealing a row of white teeth. Knight held out a hand and the other man shook it. “Hello Father Bromley. It’s nice to see you again.” Bromley nodded and smiled again, but his smile was grave. “What are we dealing with?” Knight swallowed and glanced at the door and then turned back toward Bromley. “A severe case. The worst I have ever seen. It is far into the possession and the demon has a strong hold of the young man’s soul.”

Bromley nodded, his face wrinkling with thought. “Have you tried the right chaplet of St. Michael?” Knight shook his head. “I don’t dare. This case is too severe. I waited for you to try and draw the demon out.” Bromley raised an eyebrow. “Vade retro satana?” Knight nodded. ‘Vade retro satana’ roughly translated from Latin to English meant ‘Step back, Satan”. It was an ancient exorcism rite taken from a manuscript found in the Benedictine Metten Abbey in 1415.

Bromley drew a large cross from the fold of his robe. “Let us precede then Knight. I must warn you. My Latin is rusty.” Knight smiled thinly. “Me and you both.” They laughed, but it was strained. The evil that perpetrated from the room was like a damper of the two priests moods. “What about

him?" Bromley motioned down the hall and Knight glanced. Crane was at the end, watching the two holy men from around the corner. "He's the brother?" Knight nodded. "Did you ask him about what kind of evil things his brother was messing around with?" Knight shook his head. Bromley motioned Crane and he scurried over. "Yes father?" Crane said, his magnified eyes darting nervously. "Did you notice your brother trifling with any artifacts or things that might have brought on demons?"

Crane thought, his face wrinkling with exertion. "Not that I know of father." Knight nudged him along. "This is a library. Did he maybe stumble upon an old book?" Crane's chubby face lit up. "Yes! Yes! He was reading something! This library is old, and it once was used as a city hall, and in the basement of this place was a bunch of old books and documents. My brother had found an old religious document. I don't know what it is, but my brother has been preoccupied with it for at least a week. One day he didn't exit his room, and when I went in to talk to him, I found him," Crane swallowed, "Like he is now." The two priests looked at each other. "Where is this book?" Crane thought, scratching his second chin with his index finger. "In the library behind the desk. I haven't looked at it if that's what your wondering." Knight shook his head. "No of course not. Here's what you do. Burn it. Take a match and burn it outside. Make sure nothing remains. Do that now."

Crane jumped and waddled away. Bromley turned back toward Knight and sighed. "Let's do this before I lose my nerve." Bromley crossed himself quickly. Knight turned and grasped the knob. "Ready yourself. This

is not a sight for anyone." Bromley smiled thinly. "We walk by faith not by sight my dear friend." Knight turned the knob and entered, with Bromley close behind.

The thing had returned to its place on the bed, and it cackled when the two priests entered. *"Father Knight and his boyfriend Dennis Bromley are back! Do you two love each other as much as you do little boys!?"* The thing threw back its end and screamed laughter, pounded its hand on the bedspread. Bromley gasped and paused, crossing himself violently. "Sweet mother Mary." Bromley whispered. The thing suddenly leapt up, a growl roaring from its lips. *"I smell fear on you Dennis! You are like so many other religious figures! Weak and doughy like clay! Leave while you still have your sanity!"* The thing flew into a wild bit of coughing, its entire body shaking with exertion, a trickle of blood running down from the corner of its mouth. Bromley flinched and went to step back, running into nothing but wall. Knight turned to Bromley. "Don't let the demon frighten you."

Bromley swallowed, his face pale. But, he stepped forward and stood beside Knight. "We'll ask you one more time demon. Leave the body of Jeffrey Crane and return to hell or we will force you to." The demon cackled. *"Try it."* It sneered, drool dribbling from its lips and its pus colored eyes full of contempt. Knight nodded. "Very well."

Knight removed his cross and Bromley did the same, fear filling his eyes. *"I told you! Your useless Jesus-man witchcraft-"*Knight began to chant in a powerful voice, one that filled the room. "Crux sancta sit mihi lux!" The demon suddenly writhed in the bed, thrashing in the sheets. Bromley licked

his lips and contributed, his voice melding with Knight's in an ancient chant used for exorcism, the *Vade Retro Satana*. "NON DRACO SIT MIHI DUX!" The two men chanted in unison. The demon's face rippled, its thin skin contorting as it screamed in pain, its sparse and emaciated body thrashing like a fish out of water. *"VADE RETRO SATANA! NUMQUAM SUADE MIHI VANA!"* The room began to shake as it were seized by a powerful earthquake, pictures falling off of the walls and books vibrating from the shelves. It screamed and its voice rose in volume, taking on a deepness that the two priests had never heard. "*SUNT MALA QUAE LIBAS!"* Foam erupted from the demon's lips and a glass table exploded as the room's tremors grew in ferocity. The body of Jeffrey rose from the bed, levitating several feet above the spread. It howled like a siren, loud enough to hurt the two priest's ears. The two men opened their mouths to finish the final line of the exorcism ritual, banishing the demon from the child's body. *"IPSE VENENA BIBAS!"* The room gave a final shutter and the thing gave a final scream before falling to the bed, facedown in the sheets.

The room was silent. The body of Jeffrey lay facedown in the bed, limbs stretched out and tangled. Bromley glanced at Knight, his eyes wide, his hair matted with sweat and his face pale. "Did we do it? Is it gone?" Knight didn't answer. The room seemed to feel lighter, the heavy atmosphere of evil seemingly gone. Knight looked at Bromley. "Check his body to make sure the demon didn't claim the boy's soul with its retreat." Bromley nodded and moved over. He lifted the boy's arm, checking for his pulse. He stood for a moment, holding the dead weight of Jeffrey's arm in

his hands. For one agonizing second, both men were silent. Then Bromley spoke. “He has a pulse. But it’s weak. We need a doctor.” A knock came at the door, and Crane poked his head in. “Is everything all right?” Knight turned toward Crane, smiling at the man. “We’ve evicted the demon from this soul. But he needs medical attention. Hurry.”

Crane nodded quickly and his head vanished. Knight motioned toward Jeffrey’s body. “Scoop the boy up. We must get him from this room and at least wash his face and hair, and perhaps change his clothes. It would be easier than explaining this situation to the police.” Bromley did, surprised at the weight of Jeffrey’s body. His body felt like a bundle of dried out driftwood. They left the room, gathering clothes from the dresser. They took him to the bathroom, where Crane, fresh from his talk to the police, cleaned his brother. The two priests waited outside. Crane came out, relief evident on his face. “Thank you. Thank you both. I can’t even come close to expressing my gratitude. I burnt the book as you asked.” Knight nodded. “Good.” The older priest looked exhausted, a hollow shell of the man that had walked into the library. “I must leave Mr. Crane.” Knight nodded to Bromley, who quietly took his leave. “When the police arrive, lie to them. God will forgive you. Clean the room later. Rid yourself of anything inside. Who knows what evils they’ve endured. Good luck Mr. Crane.” Knight shook Crane’s hand, giving him a gentle smile. Crane thanked him again, and then turned and waddled away. Knight watched, and then, after a moment, called out to him. “Mr. Crane?” Crane turned, raising an eyebrow. “Yes father?”

Crane crossed himself. “Let God be with you and your brother.” With that, Father Knight left the library, pushing the doors out and into the frigid rain.

Obsessed

She was beautiful. Her hair rolled down her shoulders in cascading chestnut curls. Her skin was a golden tan, a bronze that shined like the streets of heaven. The way she was standing I could see her eyes, green and shining, the bright rays of sunshine reflecting off them. I watched her from a distance, scared. I was scared of her beauty, scared of my cowardice, scared that if I were to walk up to her my tongue would turn to stone and that my teeth would fall from my mouth. I ran a hand through my own hair, closing my eyes and pretending it was hers. I imagined if it was soft as a baby's skin, smelling like spring rain.

I sighed and reached into my jacket pocket, drawing out my pack of cigarettes. I lit one up. It took me almost a minute to light the end because my hands were shaking so bad. Once it was lit I inhaled deeply, removing the cigarette from my lips. I closed my eyes and savored the bland and bitter burn of the smoke in my lungs. I blew the smoke out and watched as it danced and rolled in the sunshine, billowing. I turned my attention away from the smoke as it vanished into the air. She was standing near the fountain, leaning against a pillar, her long, shaved legs stretched out, receiving the sun's kiss. She came out here everyday at one o'clock in the afternoon for her lunch break, usually with a cup of coffee (two sugars, no cream) and a sub (turkey, lettuce, and jalapenos). She was a secretary at a office up the street, her shift starting at exactly seven in the morning,

ending at four in the afternoon, when she hops in her neon green Grand Prix, which she then drives downtown to her apartment (number 166) for the night. I went inside once, savoring the smell of her perfume, petting her cat, and looking at pictures of her as a child along with her family, two brothers and her parents. She was single. No children. And I loved her.

Behind me was a glass window that I leaned upon, smoking my cigarette. I stood then, regarding myself in the mirror. I was not a very big man; thin and pale though it was in the middle of summer. I've been told I look like my father, the same face. My father had died at a young age, but even then he had begun to bald. I'd received the same genetics; the genes had followed me across the bloodline. I ground out my cigarette beneath my boot and looked back toward her. I watched her as she yawned and stretched, her lithe body filling her white tank top, her breast moving perkily beneath. I could not get over her beauty and her sexiness. There had been others like her, but I loved her the most. She was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen, and I wasn't afraid to say he was smitten. I rubbed at my eyes and swallowed. My stomach was full of butterflies and I hadn't been able to sleep for a whole week. When I finally did drift asleep, I dreamed of her. I dreamt of her olive eyes, her candy lips. I was obsessed.

She stopped stretching and stood up for a second. Then she smiled. Her teeth were pearly white, teeth that shone like the snow on top of the world's tallest mountain. In that moment my heart seemed to flutter and leap into the front of my ribs, threatening to bust out. I knew right then that everything was going to be all right, and that we would be together for the

rest of our lives. The smile was an invitation for me to hold her in my arms keeping her warm in the middle of a cold winter night as a storm blows outside the windows of our little house. I made my way across the cement square. I paused then, my heart dropping, my sprits falling into oblivion. A man had moved into view, embracing her, his foul lips locking for an immeasurable amount of time with hers, and then she drew back and I knew that back and smiled at him. The smile was not for me, it was for *him.* It had never been me; it was *him,* the man that had *stolen* my love, the man that was going to pay.

Anger clouded my senses as I made my way over to her. I moved quickly, reaching into my pocket. They hadn't noticed me yet, but I could hear their words, words that poured from their mouths words that told of her deceit. All the women that have cheated me had all paid the ultimate price. I reached the slut's boyfriend. I tapped his shoulder and he spun around, a grin still plastered on his face. I smiled back, removing my hand from my pocket, my knife clenched in my hand. The sunlight caught the silver blade, reflecting.

The man saw the reflection of the blade, but by then it was too late. I plunged the blade into his gut, thrusting with all my strength that my arm possessed. The loving light vanished from the man's eyes as his blood drenched my arm, warm and thick, somehow like thick syrup. I withdrew the blade and he stumbled backward before collapsing to the cement. I turned toward the lying slut. Her beady eyes regarded me with fear. She looked from me to the body of her dead boyfriend to my blood covered blade.

I grinned and she screamed out loud. I had to move fast because people were beginning to take notice. *"I loved you bitch."* I whispered. She screamed louder and I laughed out loud. Beauty never lasts. Then I moved upon her.

Death's Hands

Ted watched as smoke rolled from the end of his cigarette, rolling and billowing out the car door window. The sunlight filtered through the dusty windows, casting Ted and his partner Eddie in its heat-filled light. The radio blared, a rock song, complete with pounding drums and shredding guitar. Eddie banged his head, his shaggy hair flopping to and fro as he moved with the music. Ted turned toward Eddie and frowned. Shaking his head, he turned back toward the partially rolled down car window, narrowing his eyes back across the street in the direction of the grocery store. The song ended and Eddie groaned out loud. A radio host came on, his voice dry and baritone. "I hate the talk shows." Eddie reached forward to switch the radio off when Ted interrupted with a snap of his voice. "Leave it." Eddie stopped, looked at Ted with a surprised glance. Then he leaned back in the chair. "Are we going to rob this place or *what!?"* Ted was silent. The man's voice filtered through the worn speakers. *"Scientists say that the HW Virus is not harmful for humans, though in seemingly random instances, the virus has affected animals in rural areas, including towns in Nevada, New Mexico and California. Scientists speculate that it is a powerful unknown virus. Experts say to keep your pets inside, I repeat, INSIDE until further notice. Cats and dogs are susceptible, but reptiles are EXTREMLY suscep-"*

Eddie reached forward, clicking the radio off with one long, slender finger. "Disgusting. A load of bullshit. Are we going to do this or not Tedm because I'm gettin' *reallllll* antsy." Ted took one last drag of his cigarette, the

flame circled around the filter of the cigarette. “Fine. Let’s go.” Ted opened the door and put one cowboy onto the hard, desert soil.

Eddie did the same on the other side, and the two men made their way across the street, cowboy boots *thumping* on the asphalt. They reached into their pockets and removed ski masks, pulling them over their heads. They passed a road sign that said in curvy letters Welcome To Pesos, Nevada, then, in neat letters beneath, the words The Desert Rose. Walking side by side, Eddie and Ted bared a striking and eerie resemblance to George and Lenny from Of Mice And Men, except, unlike Steinbeck’s classic novel, the big guy was the brains of the operation. Ted was a giant, 275 pounds of tall, wide muscle. Eddie was skinny and treelike, tall, but tiny next to his partner in crime. They reached the grocery store, the aptly named In-And-Out. Eddie chuckled, pulling a .44 magnum from his pocket. “In-And-Out right Ted?” Ted nodded. “That’s right Eddie.” He pulled a shotgun from his jacket. “In and out.” They stepped forward and entered into the grocery store.

The door *dinged* agreeably, and behind two counters, two clerks turned their heads. Eddie paused long enough to prop the door open with a fist-sized rock. The clerk, a tiny, balding man slipped around the counter. “What is it that I can-“ Though the clerk was at least ten feet away, Ted took three long strides and reached him, dropping the butt of his shotgun with bone-snapping *crunch* into the nose of the little man. The man screamed and crumpled, his hands shooting to his nose, blood rolling down from behind his pale, pudgy looking hands. Eddie raised the gun and fired into

the air. “Listen everybody! This is going to be quick, and hopefully, completely painless.” Eddie glanced at the screaming clerk. “Except for that guy.” Giggleing madly, Eddie walked around the clerk, thrusting the gun at the few clients. Ted counted the people up front. Seven. Ted raised his shotgun, motioning toward the floor. “Hit the ground everybody unless you want to see what it’s like missing the top of your head!” People screamed and laid

“Look, somebody has got to make a decision.” Ted said, regarding the people in the room, his dark, hooded eyes narrowing. Ted was a big man, what some might consider a giant. An ex-linebacker back in high school, he stood a solid and wide 6’4. He was older, grey hair combed back meticulously. He had a hard face though, from years of worrying and abuse. He’s spent more than a few years in prison, long stints where he rotted in a cell with others not unlike him. The people in the room fidgeted beneath Ted’s gaze, squirming like ants under a magnifying glass. Ted looked across the tiny room at Eddie Wheeler, who raised an eyebrow. He was young and reckless. Ted shook his head. It was supposed to be a simple robbery. And know they were locked in this tiny room with a group of people that thought he is a killer. Eddie shifted his big revolver in between hands, his shaggy hair shifting with him, almost covering up his hazel eyes.

The room was cramped and hot, and Ted’s shirt stuck wetly to his back as sweat poured down his back. His hair was matted to his head, and in the single dim bulb that lit the room they sat in, his bare forehead gleamed. With a sigh, Ted whipped his forehead with one gnarled hand.

“We can’t ignore this. Something has to be done about,” Ted motioned over his shoulder toward the heavy door he leaned upon. “*It.”* That sent a murmur through the room again and Ted cleared his throat. The room instantly silenced. Ted shifted his shotgun to his hand, the one still wet from wiping his forehead off. “We can’t sit in this tiny storeroom till someone comes. If anyone *does* come. We have no idea what those things were, not to mention how many there is. The only thing we do know is what these things can do.” Ted paused, and the memory came up, thick and vivid, just like a nightmare. Sharp, black claws, quick as a flash.

He and Eddie were holding the grocery store up, everything going smooth. The store was tiny, just a mom and pop organization. Then, somebody got brave. An off-duty cop, here to buy a galleon of chocolate ice cream and a bag of pizza rolls pulls his service revolver. Ted looked over across the room towards Eddie. The Eddie just threw his hands up, dropping the gun to the tile. Reluctantly, Ted followed. They stood at the front of the grocery store, near the big glass front that looked out onto the quiet streets of the sleepy little town outside.

The cop, a big, fat balding man looked nervous, but confident. He walked toward Ted, eyeing the big man so that he didn’t try anything. Ted watched the cop move closer, beady eyes on the men, short legs reaching out to kick the guns away. The guns slid on the tile. Screams intensified. A car smashed somewhere with a crash. The cop stepped away and looked towards the front door. It stood wide open, the beautiful spring temperature leaking through into the grocery store. “What in god’s name is going on out

there?" Then, almost as if trouble heard the cop calling, trouble came. Through the foot door rushed the thing. The cop gasped and dropped his gun, and a piss stain developed on the front of the cop's blue jeans. The thing was on him in seconds, long strides across the room. It screamed a high call of attack that sounded like a runaway freight train. It towered over the little cop, seven feet tall with long slender arms and extensive black claws on all seven of its fingers. It opened its jaws, long needle like fangs extending out like railway ties. It lifted one giant arm and brought it down with a wind parting swipe. It took the cop's head off the top of his neck with a juicy *crunch,* the soft flesh of the cop's head squashing like a wet paper towel. The cop hit the ground before his head did. Ted had seen enough. He turned and ran toward the back of the store, pausing only long enough to pick his shotgun. The thing screamed again, a primal scream of hunger. He heard Eddie behind him, screaming. The other customers were screaming, shrieks that people rarely hear screams of *pure* terror. Even in prison, as men looked death in the face, men had remained calm staring into the face of death. But this thing that had just run into the grocery store. It *was* death.

Ted ran, lumbering through aisles, past stacks of diapers and bags of potato chips. He didn't look back once. He heard the thing's claws clicking on the tile, just like a dog's on a kitchen floor. A scream of pain followed by a triumph shriek from the monster. The back of the grocery store was closing on, a barrier between his death and his escape. From behind him, a voice yelled. 'The door that says storeroom! We have to get there!" Ted

looked, and sure as the man said, a door with the word **Storeroom** stood ahead. Ted focused in on the plain door. Ted slid to the door, grabbing the handle and turned the handle. *What if it's locked?* He thought briefly, but then the door opened with a *click.* Ted turned, opening the door enough to slip in. He caught sight of the remaining people, a man in a red smock, Eddie close behind. Four others were behind them, their faces masks of fear and terror. The thing stood behind the last members of the people, skinny and sleek, shiny black that reflected the overhead UV lights. Its mouth was opened wide, revealing a pit of red outlined with fangs as dark as night. It had two coffee caned sized eyes, as black as the rest of its body, large compound eyes like a fly would have. It brought a large claw down and took out the man in back. The people that followed rushed by Ted, dashing into the storeroom. The thing wrapped its hand around the man, lifting him into the air. Ted closed the door just as the thing bit the top of the man's head off with a bony and wet *crunch.*

After that, Ted had locked the door and had sat on the other side, praying that whatever the hell that thing was, it wouldn't come busting in. They had been locked in here for an hour, and they hadn't heard a single peep, not a *click* or a *clack.* Ted was tired of waiting. He looked down at his gun, and he was afraid. For the first time in his life, truly afraid. He'd been in prison numerous times, for petty theft, larceny and assaulted. But this nightmare out the door was more frightening than any judge, jury, or lawyer they put before him. He looked at Eddie, who was concentrated on a pale looking blonde sitting on the floor in front of him. Ted scanned the people in

the storeroom with him, four of them sitting cross-legged on the worn tile. The blonde, the employee in the red smock, one young man and his girlfriend, who had her head buried into his shoulder. They all looked at him with faces full of fear and hatred. *Even after all that's happened, they still hate you. You're a good for nothing criminal.* Ted looked down at his shotgun. Indecision tore at his brains, picking them apart with a ruthless precision. Ted finally made up his mind. "I'm going out."

Eddie jumped as if he'd been slapped. He cocked his head and frowned at Ted. "Teddy, have you lost your mind?" Ted shook his head. The others were looking at him, surprise evident on their face. "We can't hide forever. We haven't heard anything in an hour. Whatever that thing was, it has moved on. I say a few of us check if it's safe to leave." On the floor, the man with his girlfriend chuckled. "Are you giving orders? Who made you leader?" The man said. With that, his girlfriend broke into a fresh batch of hysterics into his shoulder. Ted frowned. "You can take over if you'd like buddy. I'm just trying to get out of here before our brains boil out of our ears. I don't think that your whiny girlfriend would like that very much." Ted narrowed his eyes down at the man. The man scowled and became quiet. From the corner, the man with the red smock spoke up. "I'll go." Everyone looked at the man in surprise. He was short and balding, bottle cap glasses magnifying his eyes like a dorky beetle. "I don't have a weapon, but I don't know how much it would help against something like that anyway." He stood up, a chubby little man who was barely past Ted's chest. Ted grunted. "That's a start." Ted glance across the room. "What about you Eddie?"

Eddie looked at Ted in surprise. “I don’t think so buddy. I stay where that fucking thing can’t touch me.” Ted smiled and shook his head. “Coward. You have a gun. If you don’t come out, you might as well put it in your mouth and pull the trigger, because you are useless.” Ted narrowed his eyes. “Is that what you want to do Eddie?” Eddie gulped and looked down at the people on the floor, who looked back with faces full of curiosity. Eddie looked at his shoes and murmured. “What was that Eddie?” Eddie murmured again, a little louder this time. “Can’t hear you Eddie. Your murmuring-“Eddie snapped his head up. “YES! I said yes god damn it!” He roared. Teddy smiled. “That’s all I wanted to hear. We go now.”

They lined up, first Teddy, followed by Manny (the man in the red smock) armed with only a glass Budweiser bottle. Eddie was at the end, gun held up, still murmuring to himself. Teddy reached out and grasped the knob, a cold sweat covering his big hands. He closed his eyes and had a little prayer. *Let us survive God. I haven’t asked for much, and have even less to deserve a favor, but it times like this, a favor is what I really need. Forgive me for all the shitty things I’ve ever done, the people I’ve hurt, the things I’ve stolen. Don’t let this be the time it catches up with me. Amen.* With a mental Hail Mary, Ted turned the knob and stepped into death’s waiting hands.

Ted pushed out into the grocery store, raising his gun as he peeked his head out. He half-expected a monster to tear his head off with a powerful swipe of its long claws. Nothing. He was greeted with nothing but silence. Ted looked both ways, like a child crossing the road. Nothing but shelves in sight. Ted motioned for the others to follow him. They snuck out, closing the

door quietly. They moved in a close group, soldiers or warriors come together to fight an enemy smarter and powerful than the three combined. They stopped, and the men lowered their guard slightly. The grocery store was deserted. Not a single sound could be heard, not even the noise from the street, which was usually ever present. “Nothing’s here.” Eddie whispered and Manny frowned. “I’m not convinced. Why can’t we hear cars or something?” Eddie smiled slightly, a slight slip of his yellow teeth showing through his lips. “It’s gone!” He said, raising his voice to a normal level. Manny shushed him but Eddie ignored him. Eddie started to walk, his cowboy boots thudding on the tile, echoing like they were in a cathedral instead of a corner grocery store. He started to walk toward the shelves toward the front of the store when Ted heard the sound. *Click. Click. Click.* Ted gasped and went to grab Eddie. *It’s a trap! It set a trap! That’s the sound its claws make! It’s sneaking! The son of a bitch is sneaking!* From behind the shelf, the monster burst out, roaring in its high pitched animalistic scream. Ted only had enough time to see a flash of surprise light up Eddie’s face, and then the creature’s claw swiped across, the cut so clean and quick that there was no blood. It went from his ash colored face to bare, red flesh, the entire front of his skin ripped off like a Halloween mask. The only white that remained on Eddie’s face were his exposed eyes, which rolled and stared off into space, forever open, staring blindly off with no eyelids to cover them. Eddie crumpled and the thing turned toward Ted, Eddie’s face hanging from one of its claws in a tattered strip. Manny was screaming, holding the glass bottle in his arms like it was a lifeline. The moments after

seemed like they were in slow motion. Everything seemed to slow down to a crawl, even Ted's thoughts. He seen the thing running toward him, raising its claws in the air, its gigantic mouth opening wide, long, black, needle-like teeth jetting out dangerously. *The shotgun. Don't forget the shotgun,* his mind said, thoughts tumbling like a gymnast. Ted raised the gun, his arms heavy, like someone had tied sandbags to his arms. It was upon him now, and Ted could smell it, the repulsive smell of road kill rotting in the middle of a scorching summer day. Ted wrapped his finger around the trigger. *I hope I don't miss.* He pulled the trigger. Time shot back into its normal pace and the gun rocked and exploded, the bitter smell of gunpowder filling the air as the slug smashed into the torso of the creature. It screamed a terrible shriek of pain and its sleek skin blew upon, spraying a pea soup liquid all over Ted. The force of the bullet lifted the thing up off the tile and sent it souring backwards into the shelves. The metal display crashed down under the things weight with a metallic *crash*.

Ted stood, surprised. It lay in a mixture of potato chip bags and metal shelving. Manny had stopped screaming, but he stood gaping at the monster all wrapped up in the display. "Is it…is it… dead!?" He asked, still bear-hugging the bottle of warm beer. Ted stepped forward, staring at the beast. It hadn't moved. Its face was down toward the ground and the green liquid lay in a pool around it. "I don't know Manny." Ted said. He really didn't. It all seemed to easy, a single slug ending it all. Manny walked over to where Ted stood, and they both looked down upon it. It didn't move. Manny chuckled. "We killed it!" Manny stepped away and Ted frowned. *Something*

isn't right. Manny nudged him. "Let's head to front of the store and check if anybody is inside." Ted nodded. "Alright. But, first, go tell the people in the storage room that we took care of the problem. But, until we know for sure what's going on, tell them to stay put." Manny nodded and stepped away. Ted walked around the creature, giving it a wide berth. He stepped and looked down the center of the store. Several bodies lay in the aisles, blood filling the aisle, the lights overhead reflecting off it. Ted shifted the shotgun in his grasp. After a few moments, Manny approached him. "Let's go." Ted nodded and they made there way down the aisle. Manny paused and scooped up the revolver, grimacing at Eddie's blood on the butt. He wiped his hand on his red smock and followed after Ted.

They made their way to the front of the store, their shoes crunching on broken glass and potato chips, a sound that rose and echoed off the walls. The quiet reminded Ted of a old cowboy movie he had seen, one with John Wayne as the good guy (wasn't he always the good guy?). He was the sheriff and they were waiting in their sleepy western town for the murdering outlaws to ride in for a showdown behind the glaring eye of a desert sun. The quiet reminded Ted of that movie, where the town in hid in their houses and not even the coyotes dared to howl as the tumbleweed rolled on ahead as the outlaws rode into town for a bloody shootout. But that was a movie, a work of fiction written by a screenwriter behind a desk. *This* was real life, and the good guys didn't always win, and Ted was *not* John Wayne, and Manny was not his trustworthy deputy. Ted was nothing more than a common criminal, and Manny was just the clerk of a little corner store in a

tiny New England town. They reached the front of the store where the automated sliding doors were wide open, a half eaten corpse on the scale that kept it open. Ted and Manny stopped, and Manny covered his mouth to stifle vomiting over his yellowing tennis shoes. Flies flew around it, and the heat from the sun was cooking the corpse, and the stench was enough to gag a skunk. Manny cleared his throat and smoothed his smock and cleared his throat. “Shall we Ted?” Ted nodded. *It was time for a showdown.* Ted and Manny stepped over the body, the door dinging agreeably as they pressed more weight onto the scale as they made their way through the threshold.

Ted was not ready for the sight of the street. It was empty. Still as a ghost town, expect the ghost had not been gone for very long. In the street was a single car, parked sideways on the center line, the door open, the keys in the ignition, beeping at its vanished owner to close the door before the battery ran out. “Where is everyone?” Manny asked in a scared child’s whisper. Ted shook his head. “I don’t know Manny. I honestly don’t know. If the creature had gotten the people out here, where are the bodies?” Manny frowned. “It doesn’t make sense.” Suddenly, almost unexpectedly, Manny raised his head, his eyes growing wide. “Do you hear that?” Ted raised his head. He didn’t hear anything. But….. Off in the distance, came a rumble as something moved nearby. It grew in volume as Manny and Ted both raised their weapons, both guns feeling rather inadequate. It was coming from all directions, the windows in the surrounding buildings rumbling. “What the hell is happening!?” Manny shouted. Even the street was rumbling now, and the noise was crippling. From around the corner of Sam’s Deli, a large mob

of black moved around the corner. *"My God."* Ted whispered. Hundreds of the dark nightmarish creatures moved around the corner in a mob, tripping and moving over each other to get at the new prey. Ted and Manny stepped back, to frightened to move. "Where did these things come from?" Manny whispered. Ted swallowed, his throat dry. "From hell I reckon." As the sun sat high on its throne in the sky, death's hands closed around two men in the middle of the street.

Notes

When I read novels or books of short stories, one of the things I wonder is *"Where do they get these ideas?"* Every once in a while, an author while open up his mind to the world and allow everyone to see goes on behind the crimson curtains. I'm a nice guy. I thought I would do what my favorite authors do for me and show how the magician does his tricks. If you don't care to know, good for you. Just enjoy the stories as they are.

The Bog- One of my favorite stories I've ever written. I wrote this in a period where I had discovered H.P. Lovecraft. Now that I read this story, I understand the similrites between monsters. I enjoy this story, and it gave me a few sleepless nights while writing it, and I hope it does the same for you.

It Came From The Sky-The first story I ever got published, and it holds a special place in my heart. It's a powerful story. It was my best grab at a classic monster story, with no special tricks or anything like that. It won first place at a big contest going on in my high school. God bless Tiger Tales.

The Thing In The Box- Another attempt at a classic monster story, but this one I dislike. I wrote in for an assignment for a Creative Writing class. The teacher wasn't sure what to make of it. Ha. I don't blame her.

By Midnight- I like this story quite a bit, though the whole *The Exorcist* feeling I got from it was quite powerful. I tried to write a classic gothic story, and this is the result. I didn't try to do a remake kind of thing of *The Exorcist,* but that was what came out. I heard someone once say that there is no such thing as an original idea for a story. I'll have to agree with that. I write what *I* thought was a new idea, only for it to be pointed out as a 'copy'. But, I included it anyway. It's a good story nevertheless.

Obsessed- No idea where this came from. I wrote it on road trip with my cousin Nic and our friend John. It was a 30 hour car ride, and I got bored about half way through. I wasn't old enough at the time to drive, so all I could do was sit back and twiddle my thumbs. So, somewhere along the way, we stopped at a truck stop where I bought a pack on pens and a notebook. And, this thing was born.

Death's Grip- This story came from a nightmare. I dreamt of myself in a grocery store, running from hordes of creatures. They were tall and sleek, black as night with claws as big and daggers. That morning, the nightmare still fresh, I wrote this story.

All these stories came from different places, and I enjoyed every single one of them. I hope that you enjoy them as much as I enjoyed them. Hopefully they don't scare you *too* bad.

Logan Noble

February 24, 2010.